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Orphan of Silence: The Poetry of Charles Simic

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Professor Marcel Piérart, Dean.

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I would first like to thank my parents who have never stopped reminding me that without their help I would not have been able to juggle the challenges of working full time for the Reuters News Agency, writing a doctoral thesis and keeping my household in order. I am grateful for the support they have given me. It has made my life comfortable even in difficult times.

I would also like to thank Prof. Robert Rehder, who has helped in innumerable instances to improve this work and who has shown me that reworking a paper might be a painful task but that any such effort is worthwhile. His thinking and writing about literature has been of tremendous help for my personal and professional development.

My sister Gordana and my friends Judith Huber and Carey Sargent, who volunteered to read this work, took great pains to help me improve this thesis and I am very grateful for their assistance.

A special thanks goes to all my friends who have patiently endured my bad temper after staying awake whole nights working on the thesis.

I met the poet Charles Simic only when I had nearly finished this thesis on his poetry. Our meeting took place in Berlin in the summer of 2001. During the afternoon we were together we hardly talked about literature. We discussed the stock market, the climate in Berlin, the "Buletten", a typical local meat dish, that reminded us of a similar dish back in Yugoslavia and we talked about the war in our homeland. He told me about his family, his life in the United States and his busy schedule. It was an afternoon full of jokes and laughter.

What surprised me most was Mr. Simic’s openness towards a young man he did not know. I did not have the impression of meeting a stranger. He was the person I hoped to meet: full of humour, intelligence and understanding. It was a pleasure to meet him and the pleasure of reading his poetry has increased all the more.

L I S T O F A B B R E V I A T I O N S

Except for the works listed below, a full reference is given in the footnotes the first time that a work is cited, after which a shorter form is used.

Poetry:

WGS	*What the Grass Says*, Santa Cruz, Kayak, 1967.
SAUSTN	*Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes*, Santa Cruz, Kayak, 1969.
DS	*Dismantling the Silence*, New York, Braziller, 1971.
W	*White*, New York, New River Press, 1972.
RPLGM	*Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk*, New York, Braziller, 1974
BL	*Biography and a Lament, Poems 1961-1967*, Hartford, Conn., Bartholomew's Cobble, 1976.
CG	*Charon's Cosmology*, New York, Braziller, 1977.
CB	*Classic Ballroom Dances*, New York, Braziller, 1980.
A	*Austerities*, New York, Braziller, 1982.
WFUV	*Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity, Poems 1967-1982*, Barrytown, N.Y., Station Hill Press, 1983.
UB	*Unending Blues*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1986.
WDE	*The World Doesn't End*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1989.
TBGD	*The Book of Gods and Devils*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1990.
SP	*Selected Poems, 1963-1983: Revised and Expanded*, New York, Braziller, 1990.
HI	*Hotel Insomnia*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1992.

WH *A Wedding in Hell*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1994.

WBC *Walking the Black Cat*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1996.

J *Jackstraws*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Essays:

UC *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1985.

WWST *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1990.

UFT *The Unemployed Fortune-Teller: Essays and Memoirs*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

OF *Orphan Factory*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

P R E F A C E

Asked about the "greatest myth about poetry that has been perpetrated upon the readers of poetry" in an interview with the literary journal *Crazy Horse* in 1972, the poet Charles Simic answers, that this myth "must be the idea that a poem can be fully explicated, and in prose. I sense an immense terror behind that need. Get rid of mystery, out with complexity and imagination! A totalitarian impulse" (UC 9). My impulse to write this work is not totalitarian and I do not believe that I can fully explicate Simic's poetry. I agree with Simic that poetry defies any attempt to be explained completely. Though an analysis can unveil some of the content of a poem, the analysis itself lacks the vital qualities of the poem: the tone, the sound and the choice of words. The experience of reading a poem remains mysterious. However, there is an undeniable impulse to solve the mystery of a poem and to understand its complexity. I am fascinated by Simic's work and I wish to move nearer to it by thinking and writing about his poetry and his prose. The experience of reading a poem is not enough to understand a poet's work. By writing about it, we discover more. Too many things float away and go unnoticed while reading a poem. Although writing about poetry will not ultimately solve the mystery of poetry, it can at least draw us nearer to it.

My intention in this work is to look at Simic's development from his first book of poetry, *What the Grass Says* (1967), until *Jackstraws* (1999). I do not wish to pin Simic down as a surrealist, imagist nor realist. The focus is on the analysis of individual poems. Simultaneously, I attempt to put the analysed poems into relation with his work as a whole. The thesis is structured in chronological order.

The work is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter concentrates on Simic's idea of poetry. In this part, "The Orphan of Silence: An Introduction", I rely mainly on interviews and essays in order to explain Simic's understanding of poetry. I also refer to some of his poems to strengthen the argument. The main focus lies on the notion "orphan of silence". In the second chapter, "Translation", the focus is on Simic's reading experience and his thinking about translation and how this process has influenced his idea of poetry.

In "Dismantling the Silence", the central idea of silence and its impact on his poetry is discussed. In contrast to the first and second chapters, the focus shifts towards the analysis of individual poems. In this part of the book, *What the Grass Says* (1967), *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969), *Dismantling the Silence* (1971) and *White* (1972) are analysed. In the fourth chapter, "Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk", I focus on the importance of biography, history and war for the understanding of Simic's poetry and, simultaneously, I try to show how his

poetry has developed in comparison to his earlier work. This chapter spans the years from 1974 to 1982 and comprises the four books *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980) and *Austerities* (1982).

In "Unending Blues", the fifth chapter of the thesis, Simic's relation to blues and jazz music takes centre stage. In this part of the work the importance of issues such as poverty or social inequality is analysed. In "Unending Blues", the books *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1983), *Unending Blues* (1986), *The World Doesn't End* (1989) and *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990) are summarised. In "Hotel Insomnia", I will look at the books *Hotel Insomnia* (1992), *A Wedding in Hell* (1994), *Walking the Black Cat* (1996) and *Jackstraws* (1999). In this chapter I attempt to show that while most of Simic's recent poetry has not changed radically as far as ideas are concerned, his language has changed subtly in this most recent period of his career. Moreover, I intend to pay particular attention to Simic's attitude towards the war in former Yugoslavia. In the last chapter, "Wonderful Words, Silent Truth: A Conclusion", I try to summarise the previous chapters and I intend to put Simic's work in the context of contemporary American poetry.

Throughout the work I make references to Simic's essays and interviews. I also try to comment upon his style constantly and show how language and form develop.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHARLES SIMIC'S LIFE

1938 Born May 9 in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, to George Simic, an engineer, and Helen Matijević Simic.[1]

1954 Simic leaves Yugoslavia with his mother and brother to join his father in New York.

1955-1962 Simic and his family live in Oak Park, near Chicago, Illinois.

1956 Simic graduates from Oak Park River Forest High School.

1958-1964 Lives in New York.

1959 First poems published in the *Chicago Review*.

1961-1963 Simic serves in the U.S. army.

1965 On October 25 Simic marries Helene Dubin, a fashion designer. They have two children, Anna and Philip

1966 Receives a B.A. from New York University.

1966-1974 Works as an editorial assistant for the photography magazine *Aperture*.

1967 *What the Grass Says* (Kayak).

1969 *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (Kayak).

1970 Simic becomes an U.S. citizen. He translates and publishes some parts of the poetry of the Yugoslav poets Ivan V. Lalić, Vasko Popa (*The Little Box)*, Branko Miljković, Milorad Pavić and Ljubomir Simović. Simic receives the P.E.N. International award for translation.

1971 Simic is hired as a lecturer at California State College at Hayward.

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[1] For the dates I have relied on David Kirby's essay on Charles Simic in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Poets Since World War II*, ed., R.S. Gwynn, Detroit, Gale Research, 1991, 216-226.

1972-1973 *White* (Durango). Simic receives a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is appointed an assistant professor at California State College, which later became California State University before he left.

1973 Simic starts teaching as an assistant professor for English at the University of New Hampshire in the fall of this year. He teaches both poetry workshops and "Form and Theory of Poetry" classes.

1974-1975 *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (Braziller). He receives the National Endowment for the Arts award.

1975 Simic receives the American Academy of Poets' Edgar Allan Poe Award.

1976 *Biography and a Lament* (Bartholomew's Cobble). Edits with Mark Strand *Another Republic: 17 European & South American Writers* (Ecco). Simic receives the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the America Academy of Arts and Letters awards.

1977 *Charon's Cosmology* (Braziller).

1979 Publishes *Homage to the Lame Wolf*, poems by Vasko Popa.

1980 *Classic Ballroom Dances* (Braziller). Simic is awarded the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award from the University of Chicago. He also receives the award of the Poetry Society of America. Simic is winner of the P.E.N. Translation Award for the second time.

1982 *Austerities* (Braziller). Simic is awarded the so-called Genius Award from the MacArthur Foundation. He also receives a Fulbright Traveling Fellowship.

1983 *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity, Poems 1967-1982* (Station Hill). Simic receives an Ingram Merrill Fellowship. He translates the poetry of Slavko Mihalić (*Atlantis*). He also translates parts of the poetry of the French writer Henri Michaux (*Translations: Experiments in Reading*).

1985 *Selected Poems* (Braziller). *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry* (University of Michigan Press).

1986 *Unending Blues* (Harcourt Brace).

1987 Publishes his translations of the poetry of the Slovenian writer Tomaz Salamun (*Selected Poems of Tomaz Salamun*). Publishes *Roll Call of Mirrors*, a book of translations of the poetry of Ivan Lalić.

1989 *The World Doesn't End* (Harcourt Brace). Publishes translations of the poetry of Aleksandar Ristović.

1990 Simic receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *The World Doesn't End*. He is also co-winner of the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Excellence in Poetry. *The Book of Gods and Devils* (Harcourt Brace). *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth: Essays on Poetry and a Memoir* (University of Michigan Press). *Selected Poems* republished in a revised and enlarged version (Braziller).

1991 Publishes his translations of the Macedonian writer Slavko Janevski (*Bandit Wind*). He is also nominated for the National Book Critics Circle for Poetry.

1992 *Hotel Insomnia* (Harcourt Brace). Publishes Nikola Tadić's *Night Mail: Selected Poems* and *The Horse Has Six Legs*.

1993 Publishes his translations of Meto Jovanovski's *Faceless Men and other Macedonian Stories*.

1994 *A Wedding in Hell* (Harcourt Brace*). The Unemployed Fortune-Teller: Essays and Memoirs* (University of Michigan Press).

1996 *Walking the Black Cat* (Harcourt Brace).

1997 *Orphan Factory* (University of Michigan Press). Simic is a finalist for the National Book Award in poetry for *Walking the Black Cat*.

1999 *Jackstraws* (Harcourt Brace).

2000 *A Fly in the Soup* (University of Michigan Press)

I Orphan of Silence : An Introduction

In the interview with the literary journal *Crazy Horse,* which took place in the summer of 1972, five years after he published his first book of poetry, *What the Grass Says* (1976), Charles Simic describes poetry as an "orphan of silence" (UC 5).

> Silence, solitude, what is more essential to the human condition? 'Maternal silence' is what I like to call it. Life before the coming of language. That place where we begin to hear the voice of the inanimate. Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them. (UC 5-6)

In the essay, "Some Thoughts about the Line", which was published in 1984, Simic gives another explanation of his idea of poetry that is more extensive and tells about the difficulty of describing this experience.

> In my book of Genesis, poetry is the orphan of silence. Maternal silence. That in all of us which belongs to the universe. The mother's voice calls its name over the roofs of the world. Whoever hears it turns toward his ancestral home. A hallowed moment. Timeless presence which has no language. Whoever senses himself existing has no need to say much. Perhaps lyric poetry is nothing more than the memory of that instant of consciousness, a plea for words that would equal the intensity of the experience? It's a labor no less phantasmagoric, no less metaphorical than alchemy. But then, of course, the condition of the lyric is the belief in the impossible. (UC 113)

An analysis of Simic's idea of poetry as "the orphan of silence" requires a closer look at the poet's idea of the "maternal silence", as it is the starting point of his poetry. In his two definitions, Simic uses several different metaphors to describe what he means by "maternal silence".

In both texts Simic uses the term "voice" to explain his understanding of the idea. The "maternal silence" has a voice of its own and the poet directs his attention towards it. Simic follows that voice and "whoever hears it turns toward his ancestral home". The idea of turning towards the "ancestral home" implies that the poet is outside this home, that he feels in some way alienated or unfamiliar outside the "maternal silence". In the interview with *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic explains that in the "maternal silence" he can hear "the voice of the inanimate". The inanimate is what has no soul like, for example, stones or flowers. Putting the two instances where Simic uses the idea of "voice" together, it can be argued

that the voice helps the poet to establish a connection with the outside world with which he has lost contact. It is a metaphysical coming home that reunites the poet with the inanimate world. In the "maternal silence" the poet is able to hear and to understand the world. This idea is supported through Simic's use of the word "universe". The poet interprets the "maternal silence" as "that in all of us which belongs to the universe". In the "maternal silence" the poet feels himself as a part of the world. The silence opens a gateway to the seemingly lost outside world.

This experience dissolves the dualism of mind and world, of consciousness and reality. It is a metaphysical experience that brings the poet "home" to the world, where he feels the unity that he has lost. The "maternal silence" is a moment of illumination. It is a "hallowed moment" that has a quasi-religious dimension. In this instant the poet partakes in the universe, he feels in touch with what is around him.

The "maternal silence" is also an experience that has no language. It is a moment that despite its voice is speakerless and without a distinct language. It is "life before the coming of language" and "timeless presence which has no language". The first definition sounds heavy, as if Simic were trying to mimic the tone and diction of the Bible. Simic wants to stress that in the state of the "maternal silence" he experiences a paradisiacal or at least harmonious unity with the world. In this moment there is no sense of time. This indicates that Simic has really entered an otherworldly state that is essentially different from our normal life where time moves unrelentingly forward. In the "maternal silence" the poet has an exalted consciousness of the things around him. In this moment the poet feels a reunion with the world and it feels like coming home.

Simic's concept of the "maternal silence" is an answer to the question about how to achieve the "authentic ground where poetry has its beginning" (UC 87). In the essay, "Negative Capability and its Children" (1978), where he describes how the poets Ezra Pound and André Breton try to tackle the problem of reaching an authentic experience of the world and describing that experience, Simic writes that "the aim of every new poetics is to evolve its own concept of meaning, its own idea of what is authentic" (UC 91). The poet needs a starting point, a ground that he can use as a foundation for his quest to describe the world. This vantage point must be an authentic and truthful experience of the world. This experience must be, as the term "authentic" suggests, of undisputed origin, genuine and reliable. The poet must trust this experience as he builds his whole poetical work on it. The experience of the "maternal silence" allows him to build "on that spot ... a new ontology" (UC 87). Simic is convinced that he needs an experience that gives him a sense of being. In the moment of the "maternal silence" the poet achieves an instant of existential truth that allows him to

gain an understanding of the world. From this point onwards the poet can build his own authentic image of the world.

In the essay, "Some Thoughts about the Line" (1984), Simic uses the term "my book of Genesis". The reference to the first book of the Old Testament with its account of the creation of the world is a clear indication that the "maternal silence" builds the founding rock of Simic's poetry. With the help of the silent experience of the world, he is able to come into a close and illuminating contact with it. But above all, Simic's use of the adjective "maternal" makes it clear that this silence is the nucleus of his universe. The idea of silence as being maternal evokes associations of family, harmony, life-giving and warmth. Silence is a state in which the poet seems to feel at home and where seemingly inanimate things come to life. As the term "maternal" suggests, this moment is both a reunion with something known and lost as well as something new. In the "maternal silence" a new world is brought to life for the poet. But it is also an instant where the poet achieves the longed-for union with the world, where he has the sense of "existing", of being fully aware of his life.

The importance that silence has in Simic's theoretical thinking about poetry can also be traced in his poetical work. Silence is a recurring feature throughout his work. Usually Simic's poems are set in an atmosphere of silence or evoke intense concentration as in "Butcher Shop" (SP 15), "Stone" (SP 40), "Dogs Hear It"(WBC 27), "Night in the House of Cards" (WBC 17), "Mirrors at 4 A.M." (WBC 4), "Prayer" (WH 68), "Psalm" (WH 58) and "Reading History" (WH 55). In these poems the setting is usually at night and the poet is on his own, often walking down a lonely street or sitting in his kitchen, and able to listen intently to what is around him. Silence and solitude are Simic's techniques to reach the "maternal silence", the "hallowed moment" that allows him to be part of the world, an authentic experience that brings him closer to the mystery of existence.

The difficulty for the poet is that this exalted moment has no language of its own. Simic does not hear a voice that dictates words to him that he could easily translate into poetry. The "hallowed moment" is silent and wordless. This consequently leads to Simic's understanding of poetry as "the orphan of silence". In Simic's metaphorical definition of poetry, the dualism of language and experience is clearly expressed. Poetry is understood by the poet to be a child that has lost its mother. A connection between the experience of the "maternal silence" and language cannot, it seems, be established. The relation of experience and language is tragic like the relation of an orphan to his mother. Language is "bereaved" of experience. "Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them". Language cannot produce a mirror image ("equal") of the experience of the "maternal silence". Language and experience are disconnected. At the start of his writing there is a moment of

illumination, where the poet feels that he is part of the universe, where he feels the inanimate world outside of him. The "maternal silence" brings him back into a state where he feels at home. But this moment of illumination, initially, defies transposition into language.

The transposition of experience into language seems impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, Simic tries to write poetry and hopes to overcome this seeming impossibility. The question is how? In the essay, "Negative Capability and its Children" (1978), Simic phrases it thus: "What words can I trust?" (UC 84). The act of writing poetry has at its starting point a metaphysical experience that works as the stimulus. But the problem of writing still remains unresolved. Though Simic is convinced that language and experience are two disparate things and that the chasm between the two cannot be bridged, he is still a passionate writer of poetry. In the interview with *Crazy Horse* (1972), the poet explains:

> We are always at the beginning, eternal apprentices, thrown back again and again into that condition. There is a complexity which demands its equivalent in words. Of course, it is impossible to do it justice. I say *Yes* to the impossible — therefore poetry". (UC 5-6)

For Simic, who at this stage (1972) had published four books of poetry (*What the Grass Says* (1967), *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969), *Dismantling the Silence* (1971) and *White* (1972)), poetry is an impossible endeavour in respect to the relation of language and experience. Although Simic describes poetry as an impossible task, he is attracted by the idea of solving the problem of finding suitable words for his experiences. To attain and describe the voice of silence seems to be his poetic credo. "This is what we all share, a condition where both the content and the form are one. The deeper a voice calls from that maternal silence, the wider is the echo" (UC 6). The silence, which produces an echo, leads to poetry, which is a distorted echo of that voice. While the "maternal silence" belongs to the pre-linguistic realm, the poet has to translate this experience into words. Simic experiences the world in the state of silence. This is the authenticity that he needs and which he attempts to transform into poetry. Though aware that this authenticity cannot be transformed fully into our language, the poet, nevertheless, wants to realise it. There is a sense of defiance in his attitude. He sets out to catch the impossible. He aspires to find that which his predecessors such as Wordsworth were after: a harmony between mind and world, the thing and language. "Perhaps lyric poetry is nothing more than the memory of that instant of consciousness, a plea for words that would equal the intensity of the experience?", he argues in the essay, "Some Thoughts about the Line" (1984).

The question is how can the poet's feeling be transposed into poetry? In the essay, "Poetry and Experience" (1997), Simic answers this question:

> We need imagination because the presentness of the present moment cannot be worded except through poetic image. Consciousness is mute. Clarity doesn't need words to tell us our minds are on fire. The words, poets know, can never say what one has seen and felt. The advantage of the poetic image is that it preserves the wordless. It's only through the use of analogy, seeing connections in disparate things, that I can hope to convey the fullness of the original moment. Analogy is a form of translation. I'm seeking an equivalent for the abyss that precedes language. (OF 39)

In this essay Simic sees poetry as the possibility of transforming the silent moment into language. By means of analogy Simic can transpose the psychological, ideological and emotional totality of a certain experience into language. With the help of analogy, the poet tries to illustrate what he has felt with extraneous elements that might give a vivid impression of the original moment of consciousness. Simic makes it clear that he cannot use language in a solely descriptive way. Imagination, metaphor, is required and the use of figurative language is justified by his belief that non-figurative language would not allow a description of the "hallowed moment". The use of analogy helps Simic to transcend the boundaries of everyday language and "translate" consciousness. According to Simic, the "poetic image" sets free associations and creates new connections that are broader and deeper than plain descriptions.

The fact that Simic uses the word "translate" reflects his own experiences translating Yugoslav literature into English. In the essay, "The Infinitely Forked Mother Tongue", which was published in 1983, Simic writes about the problem of translating poetry from one language into another. He realised how translating requires close reading and describes the difficulty of finding idiomatic expressions that fit the original. Simic compares the process of translating from one language into another to the relationship of "word and thing, letter and spirit, self and the world" (UC 118).

> The problem of translation precedes literary works. For example, each time I speak (deliberately), I am translating. If idiomatic means the local, the genius of the local, our consciousness can be regarded as the first untranslatable

> idiom. It is in that state (at presence) that truly ‘so little is being said, so much is being meant’. (UC 118)

The process of translation — Simic started to translate Yugoslav poetry in 1960 when, as he writes in the essay, "Vasko Popa", he discovered the poetry of the Serbian writer of the same name in the Slavic Section of the New York City Public Library — makes him aware of the similarities between the act of translation and the act of writing poetry. Both activities require the writer to transpose meaning from one idiom or form to another. Consciousness is seen as the idiom of the individual, the silent language of each human being. Language itself, in this case, is understood as a foreign idiom. To make the mute "genius of the local" speak, translation, the transposition of one form to another, is necessary.

Simic’s relation to translation is also marked by the fact that he is convinced that, as he explains in the essay, "Poetry is the Present" (1991), that "poetry is not what is lost but what is retained in translation" (UFT 56). For Simic, translation, the process of transposing meaning from one form to another, is possible. Considering the quote from "Some Thoughts about the Line" (1984), where Simic explains, "perhaps lyric poetry is nothing more than the memory of that instant of consciousness, a plea for words that would equal the intensity of the experience? It’s a labor no less phantasmagoric, no less metaphorical than alchemy", the process of a marvellous change is evoked with the idea of "alchemy". To transform the "mute language" of consciousness into poetry is thought impossible to achieve, like turning lead into gold. Simic, nevertheless, believes in this miraculous transformation.

It is with the help of analogy that Simic attempts to overcome the gap between consciousness and language. He needs images that can create a similarity between the voice of silence and language. In "Images and ‘Images’" (1980), Simic defends his use of analogy and explains the importance of this stylistic device for his work. Initially, Simic describes the poetic concept of imagism. "In imagism", he writes, the poet has "the faith" that a complex event, for example, looking at a landscape, can "be transcribed without appreciable loss" (UC 105). The imagist poet, Simic suggests, believes that a poem can "re-enact the act of attention", "the duration of the act itself" and the "intensity of the act" (UC 105). The imagist poet, Simic argues, does not make use of analogy. Simic’s imagist poet wants to render the act of attention as objectively as possible. Analogy "would be an interference, a distortion" (UC 105), because otherwise the clarity of the moment would vanish. Simic seems unhappy with this particular poetic concept, as analogy is a stylistic device that is rarely used in imagist poems. Simic doubts that imagism is able to convey his view of the world.

> Nevertheless — the "image". The hunch that there is more than meets the eye. The nagging sense that the object is "concealed" by its appearance. The possibility that I am participating in a meaning to which this act is only a clue. In short, is one an impartial witness, or is the object a mirror in which one occasionally catches sight of oneself imaging that impartiality? (UC 106)

Simic sticks to the "image", to analogy, to figures of speech. While imagism does not accept metaphor or any other figure of speech, as it would distort reality, Simic needs metaphor because he feels that an imagist rendering of the world would lack an essential part of what he wishes to convey. Simic is bothered by a "nagging sense" that the object in front of him is "concealed". A simple description would leave out this idea of the object. The description of the object might reveal an image of oneself. The object, for Simic, cannot be depicted impartially. It seems that by describing an object we also describe partly ourselves.

For Simic, the imagist concept of poetry, which he perceives as a counter-concept to his own, lacks another important aspect. The fact that "one is neither World, nor Language, nor Self. One is, and one is not" (UC 106) makes it impossible for Simic to give a picture of reality without the use of metaphor. For Simic, the world, language and the self are experienced at the same time. The act of beholding the world and the act of trying to describe it cannot be separated from each other. One cannot simply look at the world and describe what one sees and, thus, give an adequate picture of one's experience. Such an approach is one-dimensional and would not take into consideration Simic's idea that consciousness is not just an unexposed film that can mirror impressions. A description of a thing also needs to include the writer who describes the thing, because Simic is aware that the observer cannot be separated from the act of observation.

The specific way we look, the specific way we perceive the world, already establishes our relation to the world. There is no objective way to depict reality. Simic is aware that the individual consciousness, which is made out of myriad experiences, thoughts, ideas and images, greatly influences the perception of the world. Simic wants to include this fundamental aspect of the human psyche in his poetry. An impartial description of a stone cannot be given as the perception of a stone depends on the state of mind one is in and obviously on the language one writes. Simic, as he wishes to take the simultaneity of the world, language and the self into account, cannot simply describe. He needs the word *like* in order to convey what he experiences.

The question "What words can I trust" (UC 84) takes centre stage, when Simic attempts to translate the incommunicable (UC 106), the silent maternal voice. Inspiration is the answer. In "Images and ‘Images’" (1980), the poet writes about the way the "image" comes to the poet. "To assert that A is B involves a risk — especially, if one admits the extent to which the act is involuntary. One cannot anticipate figures of speech. They occur — out of a semantic need" (UC 106). The poetic act is similar to a moment or a phase of illumination. Simic argues that the assertion that two disparate things are one and the same hits the poet by surprise. For Simic, poetry cannot be constructed. The impetus for poetry comes from a source that remains hidden and cannot be activated like the switch of a radio. "One cannot anticipate figures of speech". Simic stresses the importance of solitude and silence for his poetry. However, the poet cannot prepare himself for this moment of illumination. In the interview with Wayne Dodd and Stanley Plumly (1972), Simic explains how he experiences these illuminating moments. "I think every poet has at some time the feeling of sitting and receiving an image or a line and knowing that it’s absolutely right. Nothing can change it. What is astonishing is that it possesses a reality, a conviction that one finds hard to attribute to oneself" (UC 23). It is interesting that Simic talks of receiving an image or a line. The poet, in Simic’s view, works like a radio antenna that receives waves. But unlike a radio, the flow of waves does not seem to be constant. The poet does not receive a complete poem. It is an image that suddenly lights up, a line that startles him because he assumes it to be true.

From that point the poet starts to write. But sometimes, Simic admits, even when inspiration touches him, the first line takes years to be moulded into a complete poem. In the same interview Simic also talks about a poem where the opening line came to him a decade before its actual completion. "I had versions and versions in my notebooks. And at some point several years ago I stopped. I gave up. And every once in a while I would go back and look at the fragment. I knew it needed an ending, that elusive something which had to be very concise" (UC 23). This statement gives us an idea of how Simic works. It is something elusive, something difficult to grasp that he looks for. Simic does not write according to a preconceived method or by rules. Intuition is the starting point. Once the elusive thing comes to the poet, it is recognised by Simic by means of a feeling. "Many times one deludes oneself, and time reveals the absence of that authenticity" (UC 23). The authenticity that Simic strives for is not reached in every poem. Time will unveil the quality of the work. Time will tell Simic if the poem is accurate or not. The quality of a poem can be judged by the intensity experienced by the reader. "There’s that moment in a great poem when time stops and the reader’s self is touched by someone else’s life" (OF 39).

Silence, solitude and intuition are Simic's tools to express the voice of the "maternal silence". The poet is convinced that the language of poetry, the use of metaphors and similes and other rhetoric devices, can establish a bridge between the mute realm of experience and the realm of communication. The silent world of experience, the way the poet tastes, sees, hears, touches, smells and thinks can be expressed in a poem. Figurative language can combine these simultaneous actions and is able to preserve the "sense" of a particular experience. Simic's poetic credo is the belief in the transposition of the "maternal silence" and the belief that intuition can make the voice speak.

Simic argues in the essay, "Images and 'Images'" (1980), that "if the source of light for the imagist image is the act of attention, in the universe of radical metaphor, the cause is the faith in the ultimate resemblance (identity) of everything existing and everything imagined" (UC 106). Though Simic thinks of his poetry as an "orphan of silence", he believes that the image, metaphor, can achieve a correspondence between language and existence. His thinking about images leads him to believe in the possibility that the problem of the dualism of mind and reality and of language and consciousness can be overcome by means of figurative language. This attitude runs directly counter to most of the current ideas in philosophy about the relation of language, consciousness and reality. Simic is aware of this fact and in several essays he tries to defend his theoretical thinking against the so-called deconstructionist understanding of language, mind and reality.

In the essay, "Poetry Is the Present" (1991), where he elaborates on the idea of the poetry of the Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, Simic tries to defend his view of poetry. He is aware that his concept of poetry stands at variance with the school of thought of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, or the American critic, Paul de Man, who both claim that a text cannot have any reference to anything outside of it, but can only refer to itself. In their views, the dualism of world and language is absolute. "'There's no presence,' says our distinguished critic, Geoffrey Hartman, 'there's only representation, and worse, representations.' 'There's nothing outside the text,' says Jacques Derrida. Poets, they claim, share in the bourgeois notion that signs are transparent, that they point to an authentic reality. 'A seductive temptation to mystified minds', Paul de Man assures us" (UFT 55).

Despite these claims, Simic sees himself as a part of a long tradition of poets who try to bridge the chasm between language and the world. In this essay Simic writes, "I agree with Paz that it is impossible to be a poet without believing in the identity of the word and what it means" (UFT 56). Not to believe in this identity would be destructive for the poet. How could a poet possibly write about his experience, if he were convinced that his

words do not refer to anything outside of the text? His work would become meaningless. Certainly, Simic is aware that there is a difference, a chasm, between words and experience. "The complaint that language pretends to make things present to us but always fails to do so is no news to poets... Yes, there's an abyss between the words and the experience of presence the poem is trying to name. Yet we still have a pretty good idea of what Sappho and Akhmatova are saying" (UFT 56). For Simic, every poem depends on "that something beyond language" (UFT 56), otherwise an understanding of older poets, such as Sappho, who write about a foreign and unfamiliar world, would be impossible. If texts were self-referential, they would not be understandable as they obviously are. Poems, in Simic's view, own an actual reference point. The poems point to an experience, reality.

The representation of experience has become problematic since the rise of phenomenology, modern linguistics and Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. In these intellectual concepts the world, the self and language are perceived as different entities that are not connected in any logical or causal way to each other. The philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), coined the notion *epoché*.[2] *Epoché* is a term that derives from the Greek Sceptics, meaning abstention. Husserl used the term to stress that his phenomenological analysis of the mind did not comprise any description of the outside world. The world we perceive in our mind is to be abstracted from the world without. Sentences like "this is a tree" do not, in Husserl's world, say anything about the being of the tree. Husserl does not ask if the tree exists in reality, rather, he tries to contemplate how the tree is represented in his mind. Husserl calls this method phenomenological reduction. Husserl describes the world that he perceives. He tries to put his experience into words. Unlike Simic, Husserl tries to capture the being or the idea of the tree within the mind itself. Husserl abstains from any suggestions of what the tree in reality is. Reality, for him, is not the target of his study. As far as the outside world is concerned, this marks the difference from Simic's own philosophical concept of poetry and language.

Derrida argues that a text cannot have a meaning. He even postulates that a poem can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying, and that it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance that is at variance with a single stable meaning.[3] For Derrida there is nothing outside the text, that is, one cannot evaluate, criticise or construe a meaning for a text by reference to anything external to it. The

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[2] Edmund, Husserl, *Die Idee der Phänomenologie: Fünf Vorlesungen*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1986, 35.

[3] Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans., Gayatri Chakravorty, Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, 100-150.

text, in Derrida's view, is the only thing we have and we are unable to connect it to anything external.

While Derrida remains solely within the realm of the text, Husserl remains exclusively within the sphere of the mind. Both philosophers abstain from commenting upon reality because they are both convinced that they are unable to provide a logical or causal relation between language and reality or the mind and reality. Both share the idea that there is an insurmountable abyss between the world, the self and language. While modern philosophy celebrates "incommunicability" (UFT 53), Simic tries to reach and describe what is thought to be incommunicable.

Simic is aware that his actual experience and the description of it are not identical. Nevertheless, he is of the opinion that the reader might "have a pretty good idea of what he ...is saying". Poetry, although it cannot create a full mirror picture of experience, is, nevertheless, able to create a sense of this experience. In other words, poetry can reach an approximation of experience and reality. Or, as Simic puts it in his essay, "Reading Philosophy at Night" (1987): "Can language do justice to such moments of heightened consciousness? Speech is always less. When it comes to conveying what it means to be truly conscious, one approximates, one fails miserably...This has been my experience many times. Words are impoverishment, splendid poverties" (WWST 57). The approximation itself seems to satisfy Simic. The possibility that by means of language we can come nearer to being is perceived as a success. The words, although they fail, are "splendid poverties".

This oxymoron shows Simic's delight in poetry and language. Although he often "fails miserably" to do justice to the experience, the words are still able to convey a sense of being. "Sometimes — and this is the paradox — only wildest imaginings can bridge the abyss of word and thing" (UFT 56). The use of metaphors and similes, the use of figurative language, is a means to overcome the difference between the outside and the inside. This is the driving force behind Simic's poetic quest: the belief in the possibility that "wildest imaginings" may give the reader a sense of what the poet thinks and experiences, allowing us to re-live a part of the poet's life. Therefore, Simic's poetry is not just, as in Husserl's philosophy, a description of the mind. Simic, in this sense does not just want to describe how a thing is perceived. He wishes to catch the thing itself in order to give it to his readers. Being can, with the help of figurative language, be re-established.

The impulse to write is, in Simic's poetry, always directed towards being. Simic is driven by "the belief in the impossible". The belief in creating an identity between the outside and the inside is what urges him to write poetry. It is not surprising then, that especially in his early years as a poet, Simic was extremely attracted by the work of the surrealists and that

his early work is full of irrational images. In the poem, "Finger Prints" (WGS 24), Simic gives a specimen of these wild imaginations.

Crooked letters
Of an unknown alphabet
On the wall
Next to the door.

Tiny poems
That I write
Each night
I return drunk
And grope in darkness
For the light. (1967)

The poem is simple as far as the use of words is concerned and the lines are short. The comparison of the "finger prints" to an obscure "alphabet" gives us an idea of what Simic means by "wildest imaginings". The seemingly meaningless signs on the wall are compared to the letters of the alphabet. The signs are turned into meaningful characters. They are compared to "poems", works of art. They bear a meaning. The prints that are a product of the poet's drunken groping in darkness remind one of the idea of chance. The prints are not deliberately put on the wall. The finger prints are a by-product of Simic's search for light. Chance, for Simic, is itself an important poetic strategy. "Metaphors and similes owe everything to chance. A poet cannot will a memorable comparison. These things just pop up into somebody's head. In the past one thanked the gods or the Muse for it, but all along chance has been passing out freebies" (UFT 17), Simic writes in the essay, "The Little Venus of the Eskimos" (1993). The crooked letters, which are compared to poems, to images with meaning, are created by chance. Their meaning is unknown to the poet, but he is convinced that they have a content. The groping for light results in an obscure meaning. The fact that Simic compares the finger prints to poems certainly strengthens the idea that the way in which the prints were put on the wall can be compared to his own poetic technique. In his search for light and meaning, the poet relies on chance. He is drunk, not conscious, in his pursuit of meaning. He gropes, hits and tries. The finger prints are the marks of his search, they tell the story of his quest for meaning. The way in which the images are produced is similar to the way the poet himself produces his images and metaphors: by chance.

The poem can also be read from another perspective. Simic's initial drive to write poetry is to create an identity between experience and words. As he admits, he often fails to do so. His search for light in "Finger Prints"

(WGS 24), can be compared to the impulse to find words for his experiences. The "tiny poems" that he writes each night when he comes home can be seen as a metaphor for those poems that do not do justice to his poetic aspiration. Although the poem does not explicitly state it, sometimes the poet finds the light. Sometimes, by "wildest imaginings", the paradox can be resolved.

Simic often uses these "wildest imaginings". In poems such as "The Invisibles" (J 56), where a black dog listens at a keyhole, "Love Poem" (J 42), where the poet writes about a birdcage made of whispers, "Transport" (WH 41), where "in the frying pan / On the stove / I found my love / And me naked" or "Place at the Outskirts" (HI 21), where gods are putting on different costumes in a restaurant kitchen, Simic makes use of strong metaphors. The images are baffling and the reader is urged to see the world from a new perspective. In some way these "wild imaginings" lead to a re-invention of language and of the world itself. Simic's musings are not aimed at creating an anti-world. They are intended as an authentic expression of his experience. The images, although they seem crazy and uncommon, are intended to establish a link between the thing and the world. Although these images and metaphors seem to be the product of chance, they are, according to the poet, the true expression of an experience. In the poem, "Divine Collaborator" (WH 38), Simic gives an idea of how these images come into existence.

> He's the silent partner of everything we write; the father of all language out of silence.
>
> Cuss or pray all you want! He owns every one of our words and is only lending them to us, even when we write to the one we love madly, saying:
>
> "My dearest, you must understand my back hurts, I could not get out of bed. I lay there all day listening to the rain and dreaming of you aroused by my caresses, offering your naked thighs to me ...
>
> "Disgusting pig, you must be thinking as you read this! Remember, love,
>
> this is God writing!"

In this poem Simic argues that his poetry does not utterly depend on his deliberate musings. There is a "silent partner" who guides him and controls him. Whatever the poet writes, the "father of all language out of silence" is present. This expression shows that Simic creates a link between language and silence. Language itself springs from or is ignited by this silence. The "divine collaborator" is language's father, its source. While

Simic in the poem, "Divine Collaborator" (WH 38), speaks of a "father", in his essays, he makes predominantly use of the expression "maternal silence". The fact that he uses "father" in this poem can be related to the last line where Simic refers to "God". The poem would not hold together if Simic spoke of a mother in the first line and then referred to God, who has a male connotation, in the last line. But it is possible to argue that the father in "Divine Collaborator" (WH 38), and the mother in the expression "maternal silence" are identical. The maternal silence refers to experience and being in general. This silence is the "timeless presence which has no language" (UC 113). The silence, which can be an "instant of consciousness" (UC 113), of oneself existing in the world, sparks the wish to write about it. It provokes "a plea for words that would equal the intensity of the experience" (UC 113).

The "divine collaborator" refers to "God". His might is all-embracing. He interferes, rules, controls and guides the poet. Even the love-letter is written with the help of the father. The fact that the poet might lie about his back-ache and the poet's reference to sex gives the poem a sense of irony, which is underlined by the poet's anticipated reply of the woman, "disgusting pig". Simic plays with the idea of the "father of all language out of silence". His excuses and his sexual fantasy are not represented as statements of the poet's deliberate mind, they are words of "God". It seems as if Simic, ironically, shies away from responsibility.

However, there is a deeper and more serious idea behind this passage. In the essay, "The Partial Explanation" (1976), Simic writes that the "only principle or technique I'm aware of is faith. Faith to the language and faith to the situation to which that language points. Nothing else" (UC 103). The idea of faith, chance and God are interrelated. As he writes in "The Little Venus of the Eskimos" (1993), "in the past one thanked the gods or the Muse for it [inspiration], but all along chance has been passing out freebies" (UFT 17).[4] The ruling principle is not a god, as he ironically implies in the poem, "Divine Collaborator" (WH 38). It is chance. Chance has the same all-embracing power. It guides and leads the poet, it helps him to find the appropriate words for a specific experience. To believe in chance requires faith. Simic's notion of faith includes the idea that what springs from chance is authentic, that the images that come out of nothingness offer an appropriate description of a particular experience. This faith, Simic argues, is the "only principle" that he is aware of in writing.

In "The Partial Explanation" (1976), he continues that "this doesn't mean that I'm not self-conscious while writing. I am, but what I need to believe at the time is that the 'situation' is completely without a precedent

[4] My brackets.

and that there are no outside solutions (UC 103)". The act of writing a poem creates something new that is not in any way predetermined by "outside solutions". To reach this autonomy Simic opens himself up to chance and this attitude requires faith in chance. Simic elaborates that "there are poems I write where the strategy is directly an offshoot of some traditional mode. There's no doubt that the manner in which my psyche makes the material available is predicated by everything I have absorbed about the tradition of poetry" (UC 104). Simic cannot get rid of his learning or his past experiences. He is influenced by traditional poetic forms. But the act of writing a poem requires a different attitude: "There I have to forget all that in order to undertake the impossible task of giving these words life" (UC 103). This is what Simic's poetry is ultimately all about: to give "these words life", to make them the equivalent of life, to make God speak through his words, to make truth and authenticity speak. To achieve this, Simic relies on chance, or, as it was called earlier, gods and muses. For Simic, the terms "god", "muse" or "chance" are interchangeable as they all share the same meaning: a source for achieving an authentic expression, the ultimate correspondence of outside and inside.

Simic often fails to give "these words life". But he does not despair. The title of the book, *Wonderful Words, Silent Truth* (1990), gives us an idea of how Simic approaches this dilemma. The truth is silent, it does not require words. Words are wonderful, or, as he explains in the essay, "Reading Philosophy at Night" (1987): "Words are impoverishment, splendid poverties" (WWST 57). This statement reveals Simic's love of sensuality. Words are not just means to convey meaning. They are "wonderful", magic or simply remarkable. They are "splendid", rich, brilliant and magnificent. Words satisfy Simic's need for pleasure and sensuality. "Silence", which Simic defines in the essay, "Reading Philosophy at Night" (1987), as the "language of consciousness", does not actually need to be translated, because, as he explains in "Some Thoughts about the Line" (1984), "whoever senses himself existing has no need to say much" (UC 113). But Simic, seemingly fascinated by the beauty and splendour of words, is urged to write about his existence. Though Simic might often fail, he, nevertheless, feels an inner pull to create the impossible union between language and experience. It is this idea which lies at the heart of Simic's poetry: the longing to overcome the difference between word and thing and to allow his readers to participate in this miracle. Poetry, which is seen as an orphan of silence, should, at its best, try to reproduce, paradoxically, the intensity of the voice of silence.

The contact with things as they are and the belief in this contact springs from Simic's idea of God. "For me silence is the spiritual energy. Of course, the paradox is that neither is there such a thing as silence nor is one ever alone. But then I don't mind admitting that I believe in God" (UC

6). Simic, as he says in the interview in *Crazy Horse* (1972), is led, from the beginning of his career, "by the belief that there must be life in each thing. To deny that meant dividing the universe into dead matter and so called living organisms" (UC 6). The world around him is not simply dead matter that can fulfil a function and has no spiritual energy that could be put into words. Simic believes that he can get into contact with the things around him and write poetry on the impulses that derive out of that contact. In the poem, "Ax" (CP 39), the axe is not simply a tool. The axe seems to have an energy that can be discovered by the poet.

To believe in God means to have faith in a system that gives solace and meaning. The world, for Simic, cannot be a place where human beings are a product of evolutionary chance, lost in a quiet and dark universe, where men are the only living beings. "We are part of the same whole, the same organism. The alternative frightens me a great deal: the idea that there are living organisms, us mainly, and the rest is furniture" (UC 15). To be part of the same organism means to be able to participate with each other, to communicate. Thus, a contact between two things is possible. The idea that man is the only conscious and living being scares him. The reason for this fear lies in the relation between himself and the world. Simic is convinced that he is able to establish a contact with the things around him. He feels in tune with the outside world and believes in this participation. If the universe were divided into dead and living matter, Simic would be deprived of the possibility to create a contact between the outside and the inside. He would be unable to receive a response from the things. The things would be reduced to a function, to a mechanism, and they would be void of their vital energy. They would lack the energy that inspires Simic's poetry.

In his early poetry, the notion of God reappears often as in "Sparrow" (WGS 25) and "A Thousand Years With Solitude" (WGS 41). In his later poetry Simic's relation to God changes and it seems that he loses his initial belief. It is not clear when his idea of God changes or if Simic ever was a real believer. Initially though, Simic seems to have a conviction that what we are experiencing has meaning and that it can be put into words. Simic seems to be confident that the images that he receives out of the contact with the world are true. "Poets can be classified by how much faith they have in truth via "images". It's for the sake of Truth that one makes one's grandmother ride a giraffe — or one does not" (UC 107). The experience of the contact with the world and the true image that arises out of that contact show that Simic ultimately believes that the world has a meaning and that this meaning can be described.

In *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990), there is one poem called "The White Room" (BGD 33), that illustrates Simic's belief in God.

The obvious is difficult
To prove. Many prefer
The hidden. I did, too.
I listened to the trees.

They had a secret
Which they were about to
Make known to me,
And then didn't.

Summer came. Each tree
On my street had its own
Scheherazade. My nights
Were a part of their wild

Story-telling. We were
Entering dark houses,
More and more dark houses
Hushed and abandoned.

There was someone with eyes closed
On the upper floors.
The thought of it, and the wonder,
Kept me sleepless.

The truth is bald and cold,
Said the woman
Who always wore white.
She didn't leave her room much.

The sun pointed to one or two
Things that had survived
The long night intact,
The simplest things,

Difficult in their obviousness.
They made no noise.
It was the kind of day
People describe as "perfect."

Gods disguising themselves
As black hairpins? A hand-mirror?
A comb with a tooth missing?

No! That wasn’t it.

Just things as they are,
Unblinking, lying mute
In that bright light,
And trees waiting for the night.

In this poem Simic describes his search for God, "gods", the truth, the hidden or whatever one wishes to call it. He sets out to avoid the "obvious" in favour of the "secret". He listens to the rustling trees in the wind, which appear to the poet like stories out of the Arabian Nights. The poet, on his imaginary voyage from one room to the other, chooses the night as the appropriate environment to reach the hidden. The obvious, the trivial, things as they appear in daylight, are "too difficult" to explain. This is what the poet realises in the course of his voyage. The "gods" for whom he was looking do not disguise themselves in hairpins, hand-mirrors or combs. They have nothing fantastic or hidden about them. The secret, the truth that he went out for is "bald and cold". It is "simple" and "perfect": "Just things as they are". The lady in the white dress, this imaginary figure of wisdom and truth, unveils that to the poet. The woman reminds us of Simic’s notion of "maternal silence". It is the difficulty of the obvious, of what we experience in a given moment that Simic wants to express. This is the truth that he strives for. The fantastic has its thrill, as the last line indicates. But the truth can only be reached by describing the obvious, the immediate. To reach the hidden requires the understanding of the imminent. That which is in front of us has to be realised. The metamorphosis of gods into objects does not hold the key to the understanding of the world. "No! That wasn’t it". Rather, the hidden lies right under his nose in full light.

In the essay, "Charles the Obscure" (1994), Simic writes about the relation between poetry and religion. In this essay Simic does not overtly state that he believes in God. Much more he stresses his own uncertainties about God and even denies his belief. "It has always seemed obvious to me that we are alone in the universe. I love metaphysics and its speculations, but the suspicion at the core of my being is that we are whistling in the dark. Still I have tears in my eyes every time I hear good church music" (OF 18). Simic denies his earlier utterance, which he made in the interview in *Crazy Horse* in 1972. Either he has changed his mind about God or he is willingly obscure in this essay as the title indicates. Or the poet looks at the world from a different point of view. Simic is looking for God, for truth and meaning. He would not call it God anymore, in order to avoid its catholic, protestant or orthodox implications, rather truth and authenticity.

This search is what his poetry is about. Still, a nagging sense that the world cannot be explained persists. "Nothing explains the world and the

people in it. This is the knowledge that makes us fall down on our knees and listen to the silence of the night" (OF 19). This sentence speaks of a deep uncertainty that the poet feels at the core of his being. What he proposes to do in such moments is to "reach for my chessboard. Let them [chessmen] play each other, and I'll sit and watch until the first streak of light slips under the door and crawls to my feet" (OF 19-20). In such dark moments, Simic wishes himself to be a god who watches the chess figures as God is supposed to watch human beings. The uncertainty never leaves Simic, but still he feels consolation when he listens to church music. Still he tries in poetry to catch the voice of silence and translate it into human speech.

In "Charles the Obscure" (1994), Simic quotes his poet friend, Frank Samperi, who told him once that "every poem, knowingly or unknowingly, is addressed to God" (OF 21). Simic initially does not agree with his friend's argument. He thinks his friend is too much involved in Dante. But he changes his mind. "No more. Today I think as he did then. It makes absolutely no difference whether gods and devils exist or not. The secret ambition of every true poem is to ask about them even as it acknowledges their absence" (OF 21). The search for truth is the ambition of Simic's poetry. If God exists, God would be the only one to affirm or deny the truth of a poem. The true poem, for Simic, has authenticity. Only God can answer the poet's singing and acknowledge his words.

In the essay, "The Flute Player in the Pit" (1992), Simic describes a ritual of an Amazon tribe. The best flute player of a tribe is being lowered into a pit by his fellow people, so that he cannot climb out. The tribesmen leave him, never to come back. The flute player is doomed to die in the pit. After seven days the player starts, sitting cross-legged at the bottom of his hole, to play for the gods. Simic who heard this story on a radio show was absolutely captivated by it. And he compares in the essay the flute player's hopeless existence in the pit and his song to the gods with his own situation in a New York apartment. "All the arts are about the impossible predicament. That's their fatal attraction. "Words fail me," poets often say. Every poem is an act of desperation or, if you prefer, a throw of the dice. God is the ideal audience, especially if you can't sleep or if you are in a hole in the Amazon. If he's absent, so much the worse" (UFT 2). The poem is an act of desperation. It is a search for the obvious, which seems so difficult to understand. It is the search for truth and meaning and solace in dark nights. It is the search for the contact between the outside world and language, a reunion of the "maternal silence" with the orphan.

In the same essay Simic continues that "the task of poetry, perhaps, is to salvage a trace of the authentic from of the wreckage of religious, philosophical, and political systems" (UFT 3). The poet, thus, does not follow a particular tradition. Philosophy and politics are ruined and seem to

have lost their original strength. The poet has to find new ways to explain the wonders and mysteries of life. This is what makes Simic's poetry so fresh and strange at the same time: his unwillingness to follow a particular school, his refusal to live his life in a preconceived way, the break with tradition and the consequences of feeling lost and alone like the flute player in the pit. Of course, Simic does not turn a blind eye to tradition. He is aware that most poetry since Wordsworth or even since the beginning of poetry describes the longing for the reunion of the world and the self, the object and consciousness, the thing and language. Simic is mindful of the fact that every poet, or at least every good poet since Wordsworth, tries to bridge this gap in his own particular way. The question of how the unity between the "maternal silence" and the lost "orphan" can be achieved is answered by Simic in his own way.

Simic's definition of poetry as "the orphan of silence" reflects his understanding of the philosophical dilemma between world and reality as well as language and consciousness. The definition expresses his belief that language can only achieve an approximation of reality and experience. The relation of mother and orphan suggests the idea of separation and it also implies the idea of longing. The orphan had a mother once and mother and child were connected. This longing for the union of child and mother results in Simic's belief that through silence, solitude, chance, faith and metaphor he can sometimes overcome the gap between language and experience. Though the union ultimately cannot be achieved, the poet still tries to reach it. For Simic, writing poetry is an expression of his desire to bridge the gap that divides language from the world and it reflects his wish to give his readers an experience that strikes them as authentic and true. His search for God is simultaneously his search for a reliable experience of the world and his poetry is the result of this arduous quest. "The condition of the lyric is the belief in the impossible" (UC 113).

II Translation

Simic came into contact with poetry early as a child and youth in Belgrade. As he writes in his introduction to his book of Serbian verse, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry* (1992), "in my childhood I knew Serbian oral poetry, both the heroic ballads and the short lyric poems, as well as the few old standards we studied in school, but I had no knowledge whatsoever of modern poetry". The ballads in traditional Serbian poetry usually speak of an ideal and magical world in which God always helps the one who obeys his rules. Often these stories are simple and plain and have a happy ending. There are also a great number of poems that speak of the tragedy of life and death. Many of these ballads read like episodes out of the Bible. There is a strong moral sense similar to traditional devotional literature. In former Yugoslavia, especially in Serbia, these heroic ballads were and are still today widely read and even sung by the older people. To come into contact with this kind of poetry was in some way natural for Simic. The ballads are part of Serbian culture and are important for the self-image of the Serbs.

In the poverty stricken years after the Second World War these poems that read like fairy-tales were a kind of solace to the young Simic, who then was about ten years old. "There was not much to eat and little money to heat our apartment properly. I went to bed as soon as I got home from school, to keep warm. Then I would listen to the radio and read" (WWST 108). In poetry Simic found the warmth and satisfaction that he could not receive at home and in post-war Belgrade. This poetry made a great impression on him and Simic realised the power it can have upon the reader. Poetry helped him to overcome the bleak reality of the outside world. In his memoir, "In the Beginning..." (1992), Simic describes how in reading he achieved satisfaction: "It is raining. It is Sunday. A gray afternoon in late fall. My radio is turned down low. I am on the bed reading. Time has stopped. I have a deep sense of well-being. I love the rain, which prevents me from going out to play" (WWST 23). The sense of well-being that is achieved in reading contrasts sharply with his descriptions of war-torn Belgrade and the first years after the war, when his family was hardly able to survive. "There was a time in 1947 or 1948 when we had almost nothing to eat. My mother didn’t have her job at the conservatory back yet, and we had difficulty making ends meet" (WWST 21), he explains in his memoir. Reading gave Simic a satisfaction that he was unable to find in the outside world. In his childhood and youth poetry and reading in general were vital for his existence. In the world of poetry Simic was able to forget the outside misery and dive into the world of imagination. With the help of fantasy he was able to survive his childhood and youth. That poetry and literature in general have become his

profession, is, taking his childhood experiences into account, not surprising.

Simic arrived in the United States in 1954 with his mother and brother. The family — his father was already working in the United States — went to Chicago and they found an apartment in Oak Park in 1955. Simic enrolled in Oak Park High School and almost immediately started to read both English and French literature. In his memoir Simic explains that his English teacher "realized I was a voracious reader, so he supplied me with books... A French teacher gave me contemporary French poets. In addition to the books I got in school, I discovered the public library... I went almost every day and got a new load" (WWST 50). Though Simic had first to learn English when he arrived in the United States, he seemingly had no difficulty in mastering the language and soon started to read literature. And even his French, which he learned during his stay in Paris in 1954 as a refugee waiting to get a visa for the United States, was good enough to read poetry.

Simic's interest did not stop at reading. As he explains in his memoir, "one day, two of my friends confessed that they wrote poetry. I asked them to show it to me. I wasn't impressed with what I saw. I went home and wrote some poems myself in order to demonstrate to them how it's supposed to be done" (WWST 51). Being an avid reader, Simic thought he knew how poetry should be written. But he realised shortly afterwards that the poems he wrote did not fit.

At the same time he started to write poetry, he explains in his memoir, he started to paint and he showed a general interest in the arts. Simic explains that he was strongly attracted by surrealist and abstract painters. But in 1964 he stopped painting and concentrated on poetry. "I stopped painting when I was twenty-six years old, but some of the things I did show a fairly good knowledge of the abstract expressionist idiom, and some taste" (WWST 50). Though Simic does not refer to that in his work, he was certainly acquainted with the paintings of his contemporaries such as Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman and Andy Warhol, who all became famous in the late forties, fifties and early sixties.

As a young artist, curious and eager to get to know the new world, and living in Chicago and later studying in New York, he may have came across these painters. Some of his drawings, published with his long poem, *White* (1972), show his predilection for non-figurative art. The drawings look naive, as if made by a child. The contours in these drawings are blurred, sometimes one can recognise a figure, in others the object dissolves into an unrecognisable mess, yet others show imaginary figures, half woman, half horse. In all, the drawings exhibit Simic's predilection for the abstract and mythical that can also be found in his poetry. The new language in painting that defied traditional forms and easily discernible

objects appealed to Simic and opened his mind to look for new forms of expression in poetry too.

In 1959 Simic achieved his first success when his first poems were published in the *Chicago Review*. Simic does not think of these poems as good ones. As he admits in his memoir, the poems were copies of poems of other writers. "One month I was a disciple of Hart Crane, the next month only Walt Whitman existed for me. When I fell in love with Pound I wrote an eighty-page long poem on the Spanish Inquisition" (WWST 52). In the interview with *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic explains that a broad range of writers influenced him. "Gary Snider told me recently that he was influenced by Vachel Lindsay in the beginning. Incredible, so was I! Then came the surrealists. They satisfied my hunger for adventure, risk. I wanted to leap out of the familiar, invent new worlds. The energy I brought to it was almost religious...There were countless other poets, of course. I'd like to name Chaucer, Blake, Villon, Whitman, Rimbaud, and Rilke" (UC 3-4). In those years, when Simic was in his early twenties, he was an avid reader of all kinds of poetry. He certainly read most of the major American and English poets and had a certain penchant for writers such as Randall Jarell. Simic's early poetry was a mixture of various styles and ideas. What he lacked was an authentic language and tone. His poetry did not have a nucleus.

Simic explains in the essay, "New York Days, 1958-1964", how his friends criticised his poetry: "'"Your poems are just crazy images strung arbitrarily together"'" (OF 1). He was twenty years old. Though he acknowledged that the quality of his poetry was low, he was convinced that his poetry was about "something, but what was it?" (OF 2). The "something" that his poetry assumedly was about, was the particularity of experience that he wished to convey. But presumably it took the poet time to realise this. Simic, like most writers at the start of their careers, was fascinated by the act of writing but was unable to focus his energies on one issue. Simic initially copied other writers but only to abandon them after a short time. Nothing had a lasting impact on him. Simic meandered from one writer to another, but he was unable to develop his own style. It was only with the start of his activities as a translator that Simic started to create his own point of view.

Simic's view of the act of translation is vital for an understanding of his development as a writer. When he was twenty-two years old, a student at New York University, he came across the poetry of the Serbian writer, Vasko Popa, and started to translate it. The process of translation made him aware of the difficulties one encounters when trying to translate from one language into another. As he writes in the essay, "The Infinitely Forked Mother Tongue" (1983), "the translator is a close reader...He is like a shaman, "the enemy of boundaries." The aim of that discipline and

technique is to become an other, to speak in tongues. The dream of the translator is to experience a self that is on the verge of utterance" (UC 118-119). In his effort to translate poetry Simic realises that he needs to breach the divide between one language and another. Though Simic never overtly states it here, his concept of poetry as "the orphan of silence" is a result of his experiences as a translator. In poetry, as in translation, the poet tries to convert one form into another. In both cases Simic has to find an equivalent for the original. The act of translating Serbian poetry into English made him aware that the act of writing poetry resembles translation: the transposition of his mute experience into language. Or, as he writes in "The Infinitely Forked Mother Tongue": "the problem of translation precedes literary works. For example, each time I speak (deliberately), I am translating" (UC 118).

Shortly after he began to translate poetry at the age of twenty-two Simic experienced an artistic crisis. After his studies in New York, he entered the Army in 1961 and was discharged in 1963. During that time he destroyed his early poetry. Simic writes in his memoir that "in the winter of 1962 I asked my father to send me the folder with the poems. I sat down on my cot the evening they arrived and read them...Perhaps away from them for so long and being in such different circumstances then made me see them clearly. I noted all the obvious influences and awkward writing...They embarrassed me. I still wanted to write poetry, but not that kind" (WWST 53). Simic began to write again in the fall of 1963 after he was discharged from the army.

The new poems, which were later published in his first three books *What the Grass Says* (1967)*, Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969) and *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), focus predominantly on simple objects. It seems as if he wanted to get rid of his extensive reading background and rewrite the world in his own words. During the same period he also worked on the translations of Serbian poets and in 1970 published the three books *Fire Gardens*, poems of Ivan V. Lalić (New Rivers Press 1970), *The Little Box*, poems of Vasko Popa (The Charioteer 1970) and *Four Modern Yugoslav Poets*, (Lillabulero 1970). Writing his poetry and at the same time translating Yugoslav poetry may have led him to see his own poetry as an act of translation. In his poetry he also tries to become the other, to identify himself with the object in front of him and to translate that experience into words.

Translation is important in two ways for Simic's development as a writer. On the one hand, the act of translation led him to the conclusion that his own poetic writing is a similar activity. This realisation then leads to his idea that poetry is an orphan of silence. On the other hand, translation led Simic back to his cultural roots.

> My interest in Serbian poetry developed gradually in the 1960s, some years after I wrote and published my first poems in English. The 1960s were a time of great translation activity in this country, and since I knew the language, I paid a visit one day to the New York Public Library on Forty-second Street to read the Yugoslav poets. That's where I discovered their poetry and made my first translations of Popa, Lalić, and Nastasijević. I wanted to share the poems with my American friends, but I was also fascinated by the process of translation. I had already begun to wonder what kind of poems I would have written had I started writing poetry in Serbian....Did these translations influence my poetry? Of course they did. Reading these poems closely, as only a translator in love with the original can read them, I was experiencing their way of looking at the world and making art. There's no question that I recognized a part of myself in the poems.[5]

In the same introduction Simic explains that "I was returning to my psychic roots with English words in my mouth. I realized how much I was still a part of that universe, how much I no longer was".[6] For Simic, the act of translation is an act of going backwards in time. In the works of the Serbian poets that he translates he finds correspondence and unfamiliar things at the same time. With the translations Simic came into contact with his original culture and understood, simultaneously, how much America had changed him in this short period of time. Through this process Simic was able to reach a certain kind of self-knowledge. "It occurred to me that in the pursuit of self-knowledge I should be spending my entire life translating a few Serbian poems", he explains in the same text.[7] His roots are Serbian. But life had made an American poet out of him.

In his analysis of the influence of translation on the work of Charles Simic, Tomislav Longinovic, writes that for Simic, "the process of translation is fascinating because it bridges the gap between the two languages and articulates the poet's desire for wholeness. If one can reach into the poetic depths of the mother tongue and give them voice in English, then it might also be possible for the poet to imagine the place of his own origin".[8] The "wholeness" that Longinovic is hinting at is the unification of

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[5] Charles, Simic, ed. and trans., *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry*, Saint Paul, Minnesota, Graywolf Press, 1992.

[6] Simic, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry*, 2-3.

[7] Simic, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry*, 3.

[8] Tomislav, Longinovic, "Between Serbian and English: the Poetics of Translation in the Works of Charles Simic", *Under Discussion: Essays on the Poetry of Charles Simic*, ed., Bruce, Weigl, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1996, 151.

the two languages that Simic speaks: English and Serbian. It can certainly be argued that Simic has become a translator because of his personal need for feeling the "wholeness" that he lacks as a Yugoslav exile in the United States and because he wishes, with the help of translation, to go back to his personal past and combine it with his new experience. But Simic is not, as some critics argue, a poet in exile. There is, in contrast to traditional exile literature, no wish to go back to the homeland. It is true that Simic's biography reminds one of the biographies of many Second World War poets, who had to leave their countries during the war. But the idea of home sickness and the longing for a lost home is not to be found in Simic's poetry. In an interview with Bruce Weigl (1991), Simic makes it clear that "the Yugoslavs know I ain't one of them. The language I think and dream in is English. My favourite writers are American. I spent the last thirty-five years watching baseball on TV. I mean, this is the only place on earth I feel at home".[9] Longinovic's interpretation is too vague. It is the act of translation itself and not the need to translate that makes Simic realise how difficult and even impossible it is to change one form into another. It is the experience of the act of translation that makes Simic aware that he himself has been changed by American culture and that translation in itself is an activity that has many similarities to poetry.

The contemporary Serbian poetry that influenced him most was the work of Vasko Popa. Popa is one of the most widely read Yugoslav poets. He was born in 1922 in Grabenac near the Rumanian border and died in 1991 in Belgrade. Simic translated two books of Popa's poetry, *The Little Box* (1970) and *Homage to the Lame Wolf* (1979/1998). Some of Popa's poetry was also published in anthologies of Yugoslav poems that Simic edited. In *The Horse Has Six Legs* (1992), Simic translated several poems of the cycle "Igre" (Games). In the poem "Zmure" ("Hide and Seek") Popa describes the quest for the eternally lost.

Someone hides from someone else	Neko se sakrije od nekoga
Hides under his own tongue	Sakrije mu se pod jezik
The other looks for him under the earth	Ovaj ga traži pod zemljom
He hides himself on his forehead	Sakrije mu se na čelo
The other looks for him in the sky	Ovaj ga traži na nebu
He hides his forgetfulness	Sakrije mu se u zaborav
The other looks for him in the grass	Ovaj ga traži u travi
Looks for him looks	Traži ga traži

[9] Weigl, 208.

There's no place he doesn't look	Gde ga sve ne traži
And looking he loses himself[10]	I tražeći ga izgubi sebe[11]

Popa's poem is simple as far as the vocabulary is concerned. But despite its simplicity the poem is hallucinatory and almost surreal, because Popa does not tell the reader anything about the motivation of the game the two unspecified persons play. "Hide and Seek" starts with a factual description that someone is hiding from someone else. In the following lines, the description of the game resembles more a surreal dream, where the reader enters new dimensions as "hides under his own tongue" or "on his forehead" suggest. In the last three lines the language becomes factual again. It is here that we realise that in the search for the other we forget to find out who we are ourselves. The metaphor of the childish game suddenly receives a serious if not tragic aspect. The irrational and playful is turned into something palpable and concrete. Such transformations are often detectable in Simic's work. While in the beginning of the poem Simic plays with language, metaphor and humour, he reminds the reader at the end of the seriousness of life. In addition, the use of a simple and straightforward language and the shortness of Popa's poem are also hallmarks of Simic's style.

Most of the poems that Simic translated during his career are of this surreal and simultaneously realistic quality. Simic's interest in Popa can be explained by the fact that they share similar ideas. "Here was someone with similar preoccupations" (UC 95), Simic admits. Popa is one of those Yugoslav writers who "transforms entire spheres of oral culture, more correctly folk-mythical spheres, into the inner meaning of his work".[12] In the introduction to Popa's book, *Homage to the Lame Wolf* (1979), Simic points to the fact that most of the poems are about "riddles, charms, proverbial saying, nursery rhymes and other such minor folklore" (UC 93). The interest in folklore and riddles is what both poets share. Both poets want to dismantle the silence, to reach our psychic roots. But while Popa often works with symbols of Serbian culture, Simic chooses different means to attain a similar goal. Popa works with the symbols of Serbian culture, for example the lame wolf, which he interprets as a symbol of the Serbian collective consciousness. Simic, on the other hand, makes use of "wildest imaginings" (UFT 65) to get to the root of the American psyche. He is an American poet. In his new environment Simic has to adapt himself. Therefore, Simic has to find new images.

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[10] Simic, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry*, 55.

[11] Vasko, Popa, *Pesme*, ed., Nikola Bertolino, Beograd, Beogradski Izdavaćko-Grafički Zavod, 1978, 45.

[12] Novica, Petkovič, ed., *Poezija Vaska Pope*, Beograd, Institut za Književnost i Umetnost, 1997, 141.

The most important similarity between the two writers is that Popa wrote so-called object poems. In one of his first books of poetry, *Predeli* (Landscapes), written in 1951, Popa shows an interest in simple objects. Poems such as "U Pepeljari" (In the Ashtray), "Na Stolu" (On the Table) or "Na Zidu" (On the Wall) give a vivid impression of this fascination.[13] Simic has translated most of these poems and has used them for his own quest. In his third book of poetry, *Dismantling the Silence (*1971), there are a number of poems that show his thirst for the exploration of objects. Titles such as "Fork" (CP 34), "Spoon" (CP 35), "Knife" (CP 36-37), "My Shoes" (CP 38) and "Ax" (CP 39), speak for themselves.

Asked about these object poems in *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic explains: "If it took a long time to write these poems, it's because considerable humility was required. You don't get very far with your ego in the presence of a stone" (UC 6). The poet has to learn to be modest. He has to forget about himself, to stop clinging to his ideas and preconceived imaginations. He has to stand naked, like a humble sinner, in front of the thing that he wants to depict. In "Ax" (CP 39), we observe what humility can produce.

Whoever swings an ax
Knows the body of man
Will again be covered with fur.
The stench of blood and swamp water
Will return to its old resting place.
They'll spend their winters
Sleeping like the bears.
The skin on the breasts of their women
Will grow coarse. He who cannot
Grow teeth, will not survive.
He who cannot howl
Will not find his pack ...

These dark prophecies were gathered
Unknown to myself, by my body
Which understands historical probabilities
Lacking itself, in its essence, a future.

Simic's axe is not a meticulous description of a chopping tool with a steel edge and a wooden handle. Simic leaves out the technical aspect entirely. His poem starts with a man swinging an axe, but then enters into a contemplation of the destructive power this tool has and its impact on man.

[13] Popa, 17-25.

The poem evokes the inherent threat that man can be transformed back into a wild being. Simic's touch of the axe triggers a chain of images that focus on the idea of man turning into a wild beast.

The second stanza gives an insight of how the poem came to the writer. "These dark prophecies were gathered / Unknown to myself...". The ideas, which Simic calls "prophecies", are a product of the interaction between the axe and the body. The poet is unaware how the prophecies come into existence. "You don't get very far with your ego in the presence of a stone. What I wrote in the end had nothing deliberate about it. It came simply out of an openness to metaphorical suggestions to which I was obedient.... A part of myself had to become a knife or an ax" (UC 6-7), Simic explains in *Crazy Horse* (1972). The poet drops his ego and is open to "metaphorical suggestions". The images that spring into his mind are followed obediently. Thus, the gap between himself and the thing is bridged. The mind is omitted because it would only prevent him from reaching that which he is after. The analysing mind with its capacity for interpreting the world would destroy the mystical union with the axe.

The language of the poem is simple. The syntax follows the structure subject, verb, object. The repetition of the verb "will" and the phrase "he who cannot" give this prose-like poem a loftier note. In the first stanza the vocabulary shows that Simic sticks neatly to the idea of touching. "Body", "fur", "blood", "breasts" and "teeth" can all be touched. These words stand in sharp contrast to the second stanza, where Simic explains the mechanism of his poetic work. Here, abstract nouns such as "prophecies", "historical probabilities", "essence" and "future" are used. While in the first stanza Simic shows the concrete results of these "prophecies", in the second part, he describes the abstract process. The noun "body" is present in both parts and is the clear centre of the poem. Both the concrete and the abstract aspect of the poem evolve around the term "body". Without the body, contact is not possible. Without the contact, the images will not rise. Without the images, poetry would not exist.

In the interview with Dodd and Plumly (1972), Simic elaborates on this abstract process.

> I believe that it's possible to establish a kind of contact with these minimals (forks, knives). We are part of the same whole, the same organism....So many of the passages in those poems are passages in which I feel in tune with whatever is out there, what I'm observing or thinking about. And an image rises out of that contact, and I put it down out of faith in the possibility of that contact. (UC 15)

The contact with the outside world is possible "because we are part of the same whole, the same organism" (UC 15). Simic feels a similarity between the outer world and himself. The chasm between the individual and the thing can be bridged. The thing outside is not alien to the poet. Simic uses the musical term "in tune" to describe how he experiences the union between the world and himself. He experiences a harmony, an adjustment to the thing outside of him. The axe, for example, is no longer a tool. Once the poet touches it, the two entities start to interact. The poet changes with the touch of the axe and becomes "in tune" with it. The contact with the axe produces a series of images that explain the world to him.

Simic does not base his poetry solely on the "contact" with the world and altogether ignores working deliberately on his poems. But the image or the images that rise out of this union work as a strong impetus for his poetry. The contact that can be established with the world by virtue of silence and solitude is the starting point. The contact defines Simic's poetic nucleus on which he bases his work.

After the destruction of his early work, Simic wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the world. A way to reach that understanding is to become humble and to leave out his ego, his preconceived ideas, and establish a contact between the world and himself. At the beginning, Simic uses single objects such as a knife, an axe or shoes. He starts with the depiction of single objects because "this appeared the proper way of building my own cosmology, of discovering my own identity" (UC 7). To understand the world the poet first takes an intensive look at these "minimals". The objects are parts of the world that the poet wishes to describe.

To be able to describe the "maternal silence", the poet has to repeat the act of humbleness time and again. Although Simic says that it is impossible to do justice to this silence, his poetic effort is to get his description nearer to it with every poem that he writes. Simic's poetic drive is to bring back the orphan to the mother. What he strives for is the impossible: to overcome the difference between oneself and the world. His poetry is the attempt to give our silent experience a meaningful language. A language that explains the world to ourselves. In "Elementary Cosmogony" (CP 55), Simic describes his poetic quest:

How to the invisible
I hired myself to learn
Whatever trade it might
Consent to teach me.

How the invisible
Came out for a walk

On a certain evening
Casting the shadow of a man.

How I followed behind
Dragging my body
Which is my tool box,
Which is my music box,

For a long apprenticeship
That has as its last
And seventh rule:
The submission to chance.

The poet hires himself to the unknown, the invisible. The invisible is what the poet does not understand but what he longs to comprehend as the word "apprenticeship" implies. The invisible is what one cannot see. The invisible is another of Simic's metaphors for the hidden world that he tries to understand and depict. The poet follows the invisible, which has the shadow of a man. This metamorphosis is the first step towards clarity and knowledge. The invisible turns into something with a form, into something which can almost be touched. Read within the context of his ideas on poetry, touching is a preliminary act for understanding the world.

The poet follows the shadow and drags behind his body. The body is his "tool box", his "music". Simic does not mention the mind. He wants to stress that in his attempt to understand the world, the mind, his ego, would only distance him from the world. "You don't get very far with your ego in the presence of a stone". And as Simic, as we learn from his interviews, speaks of a "contact" between the world and himself, the body is the tool to establish this contact.

What the poet is after is an "apprenticeship". He wants to learn about the world that he lives in. He is a pupil who strives for an understanding of the mystery of existence. The invisible, which has no form, receives the shape of a man casting a shadow. It is this shadow that he wishes to grasp. As a pupil, Simic learns to be "submissive". He has to be humble and must learn to submit to chance. To bow to chance, which curiously enough is the last rule the poet has to learn, and which seemingly is the most important rule as he spells it out, describes the willingness of the poet to be open. Repetition, or the continuation of a specific tradition, is not what Simic is after. The poet wants to experience the world as it is. The quality of surprise of his poetry is a result of this openness. It is an openness of the heart. By leaving out the term "mind" in the poem Simic makes it clear that he has not a fixed world view, that he is not willing to prove his view of the universe by drawing on *a priori* knowledge that can be filtered out of his

mind. His poetry only comes to life by *touching* the world. The "submission to chance" is Simic's poetic credo.

The stylistic procedure in "Elementary Cosmogony" (CP 55) is similar to that in the poem "Ax" (CP 39) and in both poems Simic makes use of repetition. Both poems are ordered chronologically and make use of simple words, though "Elementary Cosmogony" (CP 55) consists predominantly of abstract words. In this poem Simic also rearranges the syntax in order to accentuate the rhythm. Thus, he is able to achieve a musicality that the prose-like poem "Ax" (CP 39) lacks. The main stylistic difference between the two is that the poem, "Elementary Cosmogony" (CP 55) does without a clear background. While the poem "Ax" (CP 39) starts with an image of a man swinging an axe, "Elementary Cosmogony" (CP 55) begins *in medias res*. The word "how" would require the poet to explain more than he actually does. The fact that he omits explanations increases the sense of vagueness. The invisible, to which the poet has hired himself, is thus intensified because Simic refuses to provide more detail.

Simic's interest in translation made him both aware of his own cultural roots and of the mechanics of translation and from Popa he learned the use of a simple and yet strikingly difficult surreal language. The object poems that made him initially famous are certainly a direct result of his activity of translating Yugoslav literature. But Simic's poetry is not solely indebted to Popa. The poems of the Kosovo Cycle and their narrative character have strongly influenced Simic's writing.

The use of magic realism is common in the Kosovo songs, as, for example, in the well-known song *Marko Kraljević i Orao* (Prince Marko and the Eagle), where the Serbian hero, Marko, is being helped by an eagle and talks to him. In *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), Simic uses images, which often occur in Serbian folklore. In "Tapestry" (CP 16), the poet describes a tapestry that spans the length of heaven and earth.

> It hangs from heaven to earth.
> There are trees in it, cities, rivers,
> small pigs and moons. In one corner
> the snow falling over charging cavalry,
> in another women are planting rice.
>
> You can also see:
> a chicken carried off by a fox,
> a naked couple on their wedding night,
> a column of smoke,
> an evil-eyed woman spitting into a pail of
> milk.

In *The Horse Has Six Legs* (1992), the first poem is entitled "The Message of King Sakis and the Legend of the Twelve Dreams He Had in One Night". The poem is made up of twelve stanzas and describes the content of the king's twelve dreams. The anaphoric use of the expression "I saw" renders the poem melodious and increases its density.

1
I saw a gold pillar from earth to heaven.

2
I saw a dark towel
hanging from heaven to earth.

5
I saw a bitch lying on a dunghill
while the puppies barked from her womb.

7
I saw a beautiful horse
grazing with two heads
one in front, one in the back.

10
I saw evil-faced rocks descending
from the sky
and walking all over the earth.

"Tapestry" (CP 16) and "The Message of King Sakis and the Legend of the Twelve Dreams He Had in One Night" are both simple in their grammatical structure and in their use of words and both poems have a surreal and magical tinge. In Simic's poem the tapestry hangs from heaven to earth, and in King Sakis' dreams the "golden pillar" and the "dark towel" have the same extreme dimension. The exaggerated proportions, which are a feature of folk poetry and fairy tales, are used by Simic in order to change the ordinary into something extraordinary. The tapestry is used as an image of the world. The "rivers", "cities", "horse" and "bitch" appear, in order to highlight them, not in their natural surroundings. They are incorporated into the tapestry and, consequently, changed into something wondrous and incredible. The juxtaposition of the pigs and the moons, which can be seen on the tapestry, creates a startling effect and adds to the magical ambience that the surreal tapestry provokes.

Another striking similarity between Simic's poem and the Serbian poem is that both use factual description. With the repetitive use of "I saw",

the narration of King Sakis' dream resembles the description of events that really happened or could possibly happen. King Sakis does not start his account with "I dreamt". This would reduce the importance and mystery of his report. Simic uses a similar device when he states "you can also see". The wondrous and surreal are not restricted to the world of fiction or magic. The magical can be seen and, thus, realised. It enters the world of the everyday. The strange things that can be seen on the carpet or in the dream, like the puppies that bark from the dog's womb, the grim-looking stones that threaten to destroy the world or the evil-eyed woman who spits into a pail of milk, are not mere products of fancy. As the verb "see" suggests, they are things that exist. They are not mere fantastical musings of the mind. They become facts and, thus, they become a part of reality.

Simic likes the poems of the Kosovo Cycle, which tell the story of the fall of the Serbian empire, because "the view of history and the appraisals of the individual figures found in the poems are full of ambivalence and psychological savvy" (WWST 109), he explains. The subject of the Kosovo Cycle is the fight between the Turks and Serbs in medieval times. Many songs tell the story of the lives of the Serbian heroes. Marriages, social gatherings or other incidents of daily life are represented in the songs. In the Kosovo Cycle, Simic explains, the division between good and bad is not fixed. The Turks and the Serbs are depicted in an ambivalent way. They become real people and lack the perfection of the hero of the ballads who is always able to play a trick on his adversaries. The hero of the Kosovo Cycle is less a hero than a tragic human figure as in the end the ruling Serbian knights are defeated by the Turks in the battle of Kosovo. The Turks are not seen either as brutal war-mongers or depicted as successful warriors; their fate is anything but glorious, as in the end, they lose as well. Although in the Kosovo Cycle, "the mythic and epic dimensions reign supreme" (WWST 109), there is "a sense of proportion and a sense of realism" (WWST 109), Simic explains. The heroes have every human weakness, they collaborate with the enemy or are simple brigands who want to enrich themselves. This structure, the blending of two opposing ideas, proves important for Simic's poetry. In his poems, contrast, paradox, ambivalence and indecisiveness are constantly used in order to create a picture of the world that is anything but clear and easy to understand.

In the Serbian heroic poem *Kraljević Marko i Vila* (Prince Marko and the Nymph) the hero, Marko, commits a mistake that almost costs the life of his brother.[14] Marko, the greatest of all Serbian heroes, is tired and asks his brother, Miloš, in order to stay awake, to sing a song. Miloš tells

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[14] Vojislav, Đurić, ed., *Antologija Narodnih Junaćkih Pesama*, Beograd, Srpska Književna Zadruga, 1994, 216-19.

him that a nymph, Ravijojla, told him the other night not to sing anymore, otherwise she would kill him. Marko proposes to his brother to sing and assures him that he will kill Ravijojla, if she tries to do harm to Miloš. Miloš starts to sing and Marko later falls asleep despite the singing. The nymph hears Miloš's singing and hits him with an arrow. Marko awakens, chases the nymph, reaches her and urges her to heal the wounds of his brother. The nymph does as Marko wishes and is glad that the hero does not revenge her deed.

Kraljević Marko is famed for his intelligence, strength and good looks. Because he is not present at the decisive battle of Kosovo against the Turks, the Serbs lose the war and their sovereignty. Had he fought against the Turks, so the songs in the Kosovo Cycle proclaim, Kosovo would have remained Serbian. Read against the background of Marko's mythological stature in the cycle, the fact that such a super-hero can fall asleep and, thus, bring his brother into a life-threatening situation, throws an ambivalent light upon the hero. Marko is not perfect. He has his human flaws that seem comic and humorous. He cannot be compared to the stereotypical heroes of the ballads, who never make a mistake. Marko, despite all his positive qualities, is, in the end, an anti-hero because he often fails to do the right thing in the decisive moment. He sometimes seems even ridiculous. The human face with all its flaws, errors and insufficiencies is achieved by the use of contrast and opposition. Marko's character is heroic and human, good and bad, intelligent and awkward, as the song *Devojka Nadmudrila Marka* (The Girl Outsmarts Marko) shows. In it Marko is unable to win the heart of a poor girl.[15]

Simic often deploys a similar strategy to convey his view of a tragic world. In an interview with Bruce Weigl (1991), Simic explains: "The tragic and the comic under the same roof. They'll accompany the most tongue-in-cheek verse with a mournful tune, or vice versa: the words are tragic but the tune is dance. I love that".[16] In "Begotten of the Spleen" (1980), Simic revels in contrasts.

> The Virgin Mother walked barefoot
> Among the land mines.
> She carried an old man in her arms
> Like a howling babe.
> ...
> They were piles of bloody diapers
> The Magi stood around
> Cleaning their nails with bayonets.

[15] Đurić, 224-26.
[16] Weigl, 213.

...
The rat wouldn't run into its hole.
Even when the lights came on —
And the lights came on:
The floodlights in the guard towers. (CP 148-149)

This poem was published in *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980), where Simic is predominantly concerned about war. The poem is partly set in a concentration camp. This is only revealed in the last line of the poem when the "floodlights" are switched on. In the beginning, Simic only uses contrast to achieve a dazzling effect. In the interview with Dodd and Plumly (1972) Simic says: "What I see is the paradox. What shall I call it? The sacred and the profane? I like that point where levels meet. There's a painting by Hieronymus Bosch where I think you have the Virgin Mary in front of a bush and she's holding the infant Jesus, and she's looking the way a Virgin Mary should. Behind the bush there's an old peasant taking a piss" (UC 21). Simic's Mary in "Begotten of the Spleen" has a comic stature. Mary is robbed of her dignity and high position. She is a tragic-comic figure. And the Magi's wise nature is ridiculed by Simic as he depicts them as "blind" observers who use the bayonets of their executioners to clean their nails. Though the poem seems startling and comic with its juxtapositions, the last line of the last stanza works like a blow in the face. When the floodlights go on, the reality of the concentration camp is revealed. The comic and humorous effect of the previous stanzas is changed into tragedy and misery. The shock is deeper, because Simic initially creates — through the use of comic devices — a somewhat reassuring atmosphere. One can smile at the picture of a Virgin Mary finding her way through the land mines.

The reading of Serbian poetry has made Simic susceptible to the advantages of opposition, juxtaposition and paradox for the description of the complexity of life. Although Simic never openly states that his poetry is directly influenced by Serbian heroic poetry, one can conclude from his descriptions about the "well-being" the reading of these poems gave him that they made a deep impression on him. The Serbian folk tales increased his appetite for poetry and they constitute the base of his poetic career. The humour, paradox and often surreal situations that characterise his work can partially be traced back to his early reading experience.

The style of traditional Serbian poetry, be it fairy tales, legends, ballads, religious songs or epic songs, is extremely rhythmical and melodious, as these poems were not created to be read but to be sung by a *guslar*. The lines are usually ten syllables long and rhyme is used throughout the songs. Repetition is a standard feature of these poems. Whole sequences are repeated. These repetitions are not intended to guide

the reader or listener of the songs. Much more, as Albert B. Lord found, they give the guslar a sense of orientation in a long poem that can have up to 500 lines.[17] The guslar does not simply repeat history. Lord found that the "singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer, and poet are one under different aspects *but at the same time*. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act".[18] This is the reason for the various repetitions and formulas within a song. In addition, Lord realised that most of the guslars were illiterate people who sang for a peasant or merchant public. The guslars make use of simple and everyday language. Their tone is often down-to-earth. Hyperbolic language is seldom used. The songs were intended to attract and suit an uneducated public.

Colloquialism and the lack of hyperbole and embellishment are also features of Simic's poetry. Simic's poems however lack the strong melodious and rhythmical pattern of the Serbian songs that is often achieved by the reorganisation of syntax. But Simic is not indifferent to cadence and rhythm. While he does without rhyme and the restructuring of syntax, he plays with line breaks and caesura. A comparison between the Serbian poem *Kletva Kneževa* (Curse of the Rulers) and Simic's poem "The Partial Explanation" (1977) illustrates the differences.

Car Murate u Kosovo pade;	Emperor Murat into Kosovo falls
Kako pade, sitnu knjigu piše	And as he falls, a small letter writes
Te je šalje ka Kruševcu gradu,	And sends it to the town of Krusevac
Na koljeno srpskom	On the knee of Prince Lazar
Knez-Lazaru:	
"Oj Lazare, od Srbije glavo,	"O Lazar, of Serbia the head,
Nit je bilo, niti može biti:	It never was, never can be:
Jedna zemlja a dva gospodara;[19]	One land, and two rulers;[20]

The end-rhyme, which is a feature of the Serbian folk poem, is present in the first four lines. Only in the fifth, sixth and seventh lines, does the rhyme not come at the end. The words "glavo", "biti" and "gospodara" correspond with words within the same line or the next: "bilo", "niti" and "zemlja". This structure gives the poem its fluidity and melodic coherence. In addition, the lines are composed in such a way that a rising rhythm is followed by a falling rhythm. This rhythmical tension allows the poem to be read in waves of a falling and rising voice. The voice thus mimics the

[17] Albert B., Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1960, 13.
[18] Lord, 13.
[19] Đurić, 256.
[20] My translation.

tension of the Turkish emperor, Murat, who, though unwilling, must declare war on Serbia. The deep respect that Murat feels for Lazar is indicated in the exclamation "O" and the rising of the voice in "od Srbije glavo". The rhythmical pattern is enriched with the medial caesura, which adds a short pause in each line and helps the singer to combine two ideas into one line. In the other parts of the poem some of the lines and phrases are repeated. This adds to the already strong melodic structure of the poem.

Simic's poem, "The Partial Explanation" (CC 3), uses similar strategies of pause and repetition.

Seems like a long time
Since the waiter took my order.
Grimy little luncheonette,
The snow falling outside.

Seems like it has grown darker
Since I last heard the kitchen door
Behind my back
Since I last noticed
Anyone pass on the street.

A glass of ice water
Keeps me company
At this table I chose myself
Upon entering.

After the word "seems" in the first line of the stanza, there is an initial caesura before the line goes on. The word "seems" stretches the time frame in which the poem is read not only with the subsequent caesura but also with the long vowel "e" and, thus, strengthens the idea that the poet has lost orientation in time. The first line has a slow pace as does the second line, in which a medial caesura controls the pace after the noun "waiter". The description of the place, "grimy little luncheonette", on the contrary, is to be read fast, without taking a breath or making a pause. But in the last line of the first stanza the rhythm is once again changed with the medial caesura after "snow". Simic works with pauses and breaks, faster and slower rhythms. He does without rhyme and strong melody. His poems are not songs in the sense that they could be easily sung. Rather, they are to be read at alternating speeds. The fact that Simic repeats the words "seems" and "since" adds to the coherence of the poem and heightens the rhythmical pattern between slow and fast cadences.

I would agree with the argument of Christopher Buckley that Simic's poetry is indebted to Serbian folklore.[21] But the prose poems in *The World Doesn't End* (1989), which Buckley analyses, are of a prosaic and rhythmical pattern that cannot be compared to the Serbian tales. Although Buckley is right when he argues that Simic's poetry and the Serbian tales are full of "wondrous and incongruous images" and that both narratives blend "the heroic and the incredible", the rhythm is not identical.[22] The similarities between Serbian heroic poetry and Simic's work are to be found in structure and imagery. But as far as the sound, the melody and the rhythm are concerned, Simic goes his own way. His poetry is not intended to be sung. It is intended to be read.

The act of translation was decisive for the development of Simic as a poet. In his analysis, Longinovic rightly remarks that Simic's thinking about translation led him to embrace a poetics of uncertainty.

> The poetics of translation can grapple with the untranslatability of our experience of "things and beings," since it is aware of its failure from the very start.... Simic in 1978 embraces the "poetics of uncertainty": Uncertainty is the description of that gap which consciousness proclaims: actuality versus contingency. A new and unofficial view of our human condition."(UC 91). The gap between something that exists and the incidental force which causes it to exist is the source of uncertainty.... But the very fact that the image of the gap is used to define this "new and unofficial view of our human condition" indicates that the process of translation constructs the poetic identity of Charles Simic.[23]

The words that come out of the contact between the world and the poet, be it translation of poetry or the observation of a stone, create, on the one hand, the poet's identity because only through language can the poet come into being. On the other hand, the poet knows that words fail to communicate that which he explores. Yet the poet has only words available and, as we have seen, Simic tries with "wildest imaginings" to translate the realm of the mind into language. As a poet, all he can do is to remain in the realm of language.

In the poem "Charles Simic" (RPLGM 40) he writes.

Charles Simic is a sentence.
A sentence has a beginning and an end.

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[21] Christopher, Buckley, "Sounds That Could Have Been Singing: Charles Simic's *The World Doesn't End*", Weigl, 96-113.
[22] Weigl, 100.
[23] Weigl, 153-54.

Is he a simple or a compound sentence?
It depends on the weather,
It depends on the stars above.
...
And who is writing this awkward sentence?
A blackmailer, a girl in love,
And an applicant for a job.

The poem illustrates that a poet lives in the realm of language. His identity is reduced to a grammatical unit that can be clearly defined. However, Simic makes it clear that his personality is not to be defined as easily as indicated in the first stanza. To be a simple or a compound sentence depends on something else. The poet is in the process of changing and the rising complexity of the sentence structure can approximately mimic this change. In the sixth stanza Simic defies the concept of a simple and stable personality that could be described with a sentence that has "a beginning and an end". The poet who writes the lines is not Charles Simic anymore. He asks if he is a "blackmailer", a "girl in love" or an "applicant for a job". Though the poet continues to write, using sentences with "a beginning and an end" he is aware that they can only approximately express that which his mute experience allows him to see. Language restricts the poet's ability to express his ideas adequately and, at the same time, it is the only means available for expressing the pre-linguistic experience. The fact that Simic can point to "a blackmailer" shows that language is, nevertheless, able to express Simic's changing personality and his dependence on outward things.

Simic has remained active as a translator since he started to publish his first books of translations in 1970. Besides Serbian and Croatian poets he translated the poetry of the Slovenian writer, Tomaz Salamun (*Selected Poems*, Ecco, 1987), the poetry of the Macedonian writer, Slavko Janevski (*Bandit Wind*, Dryad, 1991) and some poems of French writers, including André Breton. He was awarded the P.E.N International Translation Award for his translations in 1970 and in 1980. In the essay, "Our Scandal", Simic argues that "our big secret, our unspoken literary scandal, is the near ignorance by our writers, editors and academics of literature being written elsewhere in the world".[24] For him, translation is a significant cultural activity that helps develop an understanding not only of foreign cultures but throws a new and refreshing light on one's own life. Besides his translation activity, Simic has edited several books of poetry by German and Spanish

[24] Charles, Simic, "Our Scandal", *Boston Review*, summer 1997 <http://www.bostonreview.mit.edu/BR22.3/ Simic.html>.

writers. One of the most important is *Another Republic: 17 European and South American Writers* (1994), which he edited with his friend, the poet, Mark Strand. According to Simic we can profit from translation and learn that "poetry is not what is lost but what is retained in translation" (UFT 56).

III Dismantling the Silence

Simic's first book of poetry, *What the Grass Says* (1967), comprises thirty-one poems. Almost every poem circles around a different subject matter. In the first poem, "Summer Morning" (WGS 2-3), Simic describes a summer landscape, in "Needles" (WGS 11) and "My Shoes" (WGS 12), the poet dwells on simple, man-made objects. In "Meat" (WGS 13), the poet ponders the fragility of human life by evoking the crude and shocking image of raw meat. In "Butcher Shop" (WGS 14), Simic compares the glittering of a knife with the brightness of an altar. Simic is predominantly occupied with the idea of nature in its various forms, but he has not restricted himself to this single idea. There is an openness and variety in terms of the use of images in his first book of poetry that already indicates the richness and breadth of his later work. The reader can already see Simic's preoccupation and interest in small things like ants, sparrows or roaches. Barking dogs, which are encountered often in his later poetry, are already present in his first book. The image of war, which especially dominates his later poetry, is already hinted at in the poems "Marching" (WGS 35) and "Hearing Steps" (WGS 19), and more obviously in "War" (WGS 31).

The fundamental idea in *What the Grass Says* (1967), is the quest for the reunion of nature, the outside world, with the mind. In "Summer Morning" (WGS 2-3), the first poem in *What the Grass Says* (1967), Simic lies naked on his bed and listens to the miracles of a summer morning. The poem reminds us in its tone of one of Walt Whitman's powerful songs. There is a vitality in this poem which otherwise is often absent in Simic's oeuvre. Naked, fully stretched, "like this", as the poet simply suggests, he experiences the power of "eternal life". But the poem is not like one of Whitman's powerful compilations of the wonders of the world. Simic dives into the underground, into the dark places, where even the sun has not yet arrived.

> I know all the dark places
> Where the sun hasn't reached yet,
> Where the singing has just ceased
> In the hidden aviaries of the crickets - -
> Anthills where it goes on raining - -
> Slumbering spiders dreaming of wedding dresses.

In this first poem the reader gets a sense that Simic focuses on the secret and hidden side of nature. He leaves the places with the "smell of damp hay" and enters into the tiny and fragile world of the unknown. The singing has stopped in this place and it is still raining. This shows that the

poet moves from sound into silence. The fact that the sun has not yet reached this spot of the world shows that the movement in the poem is also directed from light towards darkness. But the absence of light is not depicted negatively. The spiders in their webs dream of "wedding dresses". Even in this dark place there is a sense of joy. And more, it is a place to dream, the place for imagination. The beings that inhabit this dark place are small and weak: a spider, ants and crickets. One has to bend down and listen carefully in order to realise their existence. We have to keep in mind that the poet is lying stretched out on his bed. It is in this poem that the reader is reminded of the title of the book *What the Grass Says*. Simic points to a world that is hardly graspable. It is tiny and dark like insects, and it holds the promise of a revelation if we listen carefully to it. Compared to the other scenes in the poem, where the poet stands — in imagination — on the cornfield, a powerful image of strength and prosperity, the anthills and crickets look pale in comparison. But the insects control the realm of dreams and imagination as the image of the spider suggests. They have a strength of their own.

The poem moves from light to darkness, from sound to silence and from tallness to smallness. The "horses" stand in contrast to the "spiders", the "cornfield" to the "anthills", "morning", with its implication of sun and light, to "dark places". Simic works with the device of contrast to clarify the direction of his movement. His choice of words is simple and the syntax is prose-like and repetition is sparse, with the exception of the pronoun "I" and the conjunction "where". The stanza "The good tree with its voice / Of a mountain brook / Knows my steps / it hushes" or the phrase "tiny soul of the caterpillar" show how Simic tries to find connections between disparate things. The tree, with the help of the words "good" and "hushes", becomes human. Simic also uses personification in respect to the caterpillar. This strategy of defamiliarization is often applied in Simic's poetry. The everyday receives a new face. The caterpillar has a soul and the tree acts like a human being.

In the course of the poem Simic leaves this dark place again to "pass over the farmhouses" to depict rural life. Then he turns back to a stone that cracks "a knuckle" and another one that "turns in its sleep". The poet evokes the world of sleep and dreams. Lying stretched out on his bed, Simic enters both the worlds of light and darkness. Both "worlds" attract him. As the poem advances, Simic seems more inclined towards the world of darkness. The second but last stanza underlines this idea:

> Further ahead, someone
> Even more silent
> Passes over the grass
> Without bending it. (WGS 3)

The "someone" that passes over the grass is so small and light that he does not even "bend" the grass. But what he or it is, Simic does not say. He remains enigmatic and simply describes the being as "someone". The "someone" is smaller than the insects that he evokes in the first stanzas of the poem. In this place shape, colour, weight and sound are almost lost. What the poet describes can only be hinted at with the word "someone". What the poet has in mind with that word is something that remains always enigmatic and hidden. It has no shape or weight, yet, it still exists and its impact on the poet is that of relief.

- - And all of sudden
In the midst of that silence
It seems possible
To live simply
On the earth. (WGS 3)

The silence to which the poet has led the reader is not dead. Something or "someone" moves in this silent world. Obviously it is this experience which gives Simic the power and strength to say that it is possible to "live simply / On the earth". The silence, although very elusive and almost impossible to catch, has something to say. It speaks so that its existence can be manifested. The silence is not the absence of sound. It is a meditative experience that gives the poet the conviction, as he argues in the interview with Dodd and Plumly (1972), that "we are a part of the same whole, the same organism" (UC 15). The poet is in touch with the world outside, yet, not only with the world of tangible objects but also with that which remains silent and hardly graspable.

Simic's poetic quest is to establish a spiritual contact with the world that surrounds him. The use of personification certainly underlines this idea. In *What the Grass Says* (1967), the poet has a penchant for minutiae. The spiders, crickets and ants stand, on the one hand, for themselves and are examples of the world of minutiae. From the point of view of structure, they are, on the other hand, to be seen as the guardians on the threshold of the realm of the unknown for which Simic yearns. In their tininess they pave the way for the poet to enter a place which, in comparison to the world of insects, is even smaller. They give the reader the idea that what Simic strives for is hardly reachable, yet still there. In "The Roach" (WGS 16), Simic again uses the image of a tiny insect to illustrate his quest.

When I see a roach
I do not grow violent like the others,
I stop, as if an ominous sign

Had passed between us.

This roach is like a limb to me.
It has no fear. When I raise my voice
It stops. When I close my eyes
It draws near.

I yearn to be still, so still
That I can hear her coming
Way ahead, I can feel what she wishes.

The sight of the roach does not repel the poet. On the contrary, the poet stops as if a sign has passed between him and the roach. The sign is "ominous", indicating disaster or difficulty. However, there is nothing disastrous about the animal. There is something prophetic in the meeting between the poet and the roach. It paves the way for the poet's contact with the world. In addition, it shows Simic's deep respect before this small creature. The roach becomes a "limb", a part, of the poet and the two start to interact. There is a wordless communication between them: "When I raise my voice / It stops". When the poet is silent and keeps his eyes closed, the roach comes nearer to him. The fact that the poet uses a feminine pronoun for the roach intensifies the relation between them. The poet and the insect are attracted to each other like a man and a woman. Their communication reaches a point, where the poet is able to "feel what she wishes". The two beings merge and become one. The distance between them and the initial alienation vanishes.

The closed eyes are an image of concentration. In this moment of silence and darkness the roach advances. The interaction with the animal is a metaphor for the dialogue with the world. The moment, in which the poet stops speaking and becomes silent, the world, like the roach, draws nearer to him. Simic strives for that moment of contact. "I yearn to be still, so still". In this state of stillness, in this state of absolute concentration, the poet is able to reach the animal, the world around him. There is still more yearning for contact.

I have grown with a wish to be penetrated,
With these roaches and much later with the birds,
And be born and suffer injuries and endure,
So that I might comprehend what I already am.

The contact with the roach provides only the beginning. Later he wishes to enter into contact with birds. What the poet longs for is penetration, a union with the world. The poet, separated by his mind and imagination from the

world, longs to reunite with what surrounds him in order to realise "what I already am". There is a sense that he can only understand himself fully once he is able to understand the things around him. His wish to establish a union with the world is accompanied by injuries and pain. The wish to become one with the roach is so strong that the poet seems to accept pain to be able to understand himself and the world. Once the reunion with the roach is accomplished and "later with the birds" the poet wants to be "born". Simic avoids using the term reborn. Thus, he stresses that only the procedure depicted in the poem might allow him to experience the birth of a being that understands itself. In "The Roach" (WGS 16), the tiny animal serves Simic as a symbol and as a means of entering the dark and hidden place for which he strives.

The vocabulary is again simple. We see Simic using his vocabulary in a defamiliarizing context. The use of the word "fear" and the pronoun "she" give the animal a human touch and the word "penetrated" evokes associations of violence and sex. In "The Roach" (WGS 16), Simic also works with rhythm in order to mimic the interrelation between the "I" and the roach. Long sentences or phrases are followed by short ones and vice versa. Thus, he is able to strengthen the movement between the two beings, their stopping and slow approximation. The sentences that express the poet's wish to unite himself with the world of the animal are longer and flow with more ease, indicating that the poet has reached his goal.

In "Poem" (WGS 22), Simic plays a variation of the idea of the union between the outside world and man.

> This is the hour in which I want to
> Travel through bodies of sleeping children
> Extracting something infinitely small:
> Like that single grain of sand
> The sea has lost to the land
> And for which now, at night,
> The waves are searching
> To carry it back into the sea.

In this poem Simic uses the image of the "sea". The "sea" hardly ever appears in Simic's poetry. More often landscapes or animals appear in his work. In this poem Simic again illustrates that what he is after is something "infinitely small" like a "single grain of sand". But in "Poem" (WGS 22), Simic stresses the idea that what he strives for is something that is lost. There is a sense that what he is after has once been a part of man but disappeared. It is striking that Simic uses the image of "sleeping children" to illustrate this idea. Children are innocent. They still lack the rationality and the distance from the world of the adult. They are, in their dreams,

Simic suggests, still in a state where the sea and the grain of sand are together. They still experience the contact that the poet tries to establish. Simic wishes to achieve this contact by the most effective means: penetration. It is as if he wants to become one with the sleeping children in order to feel the contact as intensely as possible.

There is a sense that Simic wishes to achieve what the medieval philosophers called the *unio mystica*, the union of the self with God. In his fourth book of poetry, *White* (1972), Simic cites the German mystic, Meister Eckhart. This clearly shows that Simic has an interest in metaphysical musings about God, the world and the self. Simic, in his poetry, seldom states whose ideas he is remodelling. Philosophers, such as Plato, the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, or the German phenomenologist, Edmund Husserl, who all, as he repeatedly explains in his interviews and essays, had an influence on his writing, are hardly ever quoted directly. Rather, Simic tries to re-formulate and re-shape, with his own words, the ideas of these philosophers.

In order to establish the contact between the world and the "I" silence is of utmost importance. In "Evening" (WGS 28), Simic describes a landscape before sunset.

> The snail gives off stillness.
> The weed is blessed.
> At the end of a long day
> The man finds joy, the water peace.
>
> Let all be simple. Let all stand still
> Without a final direction.
> That which brings you into the world
> To take you away at death
> Is one and the same;
> The shadow long and pointy
> Is its church.
>
> At night some understand what the grass says.
> The grass knows a word or two.
> It is not much. It repeats the same word
> Again and again, but not too loudly . . .
> The grass is certain of tomorrow.

This poem, which is like a prayer, offers relaxation. The snail determines the rhythm of the poem and underlines the idea that in this place everything moves slowly and stillness is the dominant quality of the landscape. There is a feeling of "joy" and "peace", a harmony otherwise seemingly

unattainable. At the "end of a long day", in the midst of the moving and chaotic world, the poet urges in an authoritative tone: "let all be simple". With this imperative the poet wants to heighten the atmosphere of peace which already reigns. He implores himself to "let all stand still / Without a final direction". Movement should come to a halt. The onward movement of time should freeze. Time even loses its importance as "That which brings you into the world / To take you away at death / Is one and the same". The span of our life, our time in the world, is condensed into a single moment. Simic wants to seize the moment. One should abstain from thoughts about the future, from thoughts about our goals, which give life a "direction". One must, Simic suggests, shake off the concept of time altogether because it only works as a distraction and prevents him from entering into contact with the world. It is the moment of the "maternal silence" when time dissolves and the mind and the world unite.

The evening landscape, which serves as a starting point in the first stanza, is followed by a prayer-like incantation that leads the poet into a state of solemn relaxation. Both stanzas work as preliminaries for the understanding of nature. The words "blessed" and "church" show that only such a procedure can help someone to "understand what the grass says". In contrast to "The Roach" (WGS 16) and "Poem" (WGS 22), where Simic wants to establish the reunion with the world by means of penetration, the process in the poem "Evening" (WGS 28) is much more peaceful. Here, union is reached through concentration and identification with the peaceful and harmonious landscape. The mind adjusts itself to the state that already reigns outside.

In the third stanza Simic again remains enigmatic about what nature has to say. "The grass knows a word or two / It is not much". The word, which the grass repeats, is not uttered "too loudly". The poet has to bend down and listen carefully. The only quality of the grass that the poet specifies is that it is "certain of tomorrow". The second stanza, where the poet urges himself to forget the concept of time and movement, throws another light upon the imperative "let all stand still / without a final direction". The grass, in contrast to man, is certain of tomorrow. While the grass knows that after this evening a morning will follow, we do not. We worry about tomorrow and deprive ourselves of our knowledge of it. To worry means to put something into question. This scepticism, Simic seems to suggest, is wrong. We have to overcome our worrying concept of time in order to become sure of tomorrow. The grass, as an integral part of the world, is embedded in the harmonious concept of nature and is "aware" of a certainty for which the poet strives. Although Simic does not refer to it, the word that the grass might repeat is *certainty*.

The idea of certainty and the related concept of security reappears in "Sparrow" (WGS 25). Although the poem itself is strikingly simple and

almost naive, it should not be underestimated within the early work of Simic as it sheds light upon his view of the world and his relation to God. The scenery is simple. The poet catches with his own hands a sparrow in his garden. The bird trembles in his hands. Simic uses this image as a metaphor for the relation between God and man. The fluttering and trembling sparrow stands for man and the hands are a symbol for the sheltering presence of God. His quest for a reunion and an understanding of the world lead Simic, in his early stage, to the concept of God. Only the concept of God, it seems, can give him the security and certainty for which he strives. The sparrow, in all its weakness and helplessness, receives the shelter and support that he needs. The poet needs security.

In "A Thousand Years With Solitude" (WGS 41), Simic combines the ideas of silence, nature and God.

Toward evening
When it stops snowing
Our homes rise
High above the earth
Into that soundless space
Where neither the bark of a dog
Nor the cry of a bird reaches.

We are like the ancient seamen:
Our bodies are the ocean
And the silence is the boat
God has provided
For our long and unknown journey.

The poet evokes an evening landscape. The snow has eventually stopped falling and the houses, as in a surreal painting, hover above the ground. There is a sense of elevation; a sense that the poet experiences a moment of intense and high emotion. The houses lift themselves and seem to move nearer to God. The fact that the snow has stopped falling and the sky is cleared from the snowflakes strengthens the idea of clarity. The image of the landscape, after the snowing has ended, becomes sharper, evoking the poet's increased sensibility. Again, silence reigns in this place.

In the second stanza Simic makes use of similes. Men, he argues, are like the ancient seamen. Interestingly, the poet compares our bodies to the sea. This indicates that Simic believes that mind and body are two separate entities. The mind, imagination, is compared to the seamen, while the body is the sea. The body is compared to the unknown and alien element of water. There is something that separates and alienates the body from the mind. This simile illustrates the chasm that Simic experiences between the

world and himself. Even his body is strange to him. Yet there is silence which helps the poet to bridge the divide. "The silence is the boat", the vessel, which helps us to move on the water without drowning, without losing ourselves. Silence establishes the link between the outside and the inside. It is God that provides the vessel for us. Silence, for Simic, is the means to survive in this world.

- - And all of a sudden
In the midst of that silence
It seems possible
To live simply
On the earth. (WGS 3)

Silence, Simic argues in the interview in *Crazy Horse* (1972), "is the spiritual energy" (UC 6). It is not, as he says, "something negative, passive" (UC 6). With the means of silence and "solitude", as the title of this poem indicates, the poet is able to get nearer to the world. Silence not only provides the means to attain his goal, it also gives solace to the poet. The world is no longer a strange place. The poet is able to identify himself with the world and the objects around him and to enter into contact with them. "All of a sudden" the world becomes a manageable place, a place that can be understood.

In "Dismantling the Silence" (CP 31), which is also the title of his third book of poetry, Simic gives the quest for silence an almost magical tinge.

Take down its ears first,
Carefully, so they don't spill over.
With a sharp whistle slit its belly open.
If there are ashes in it, close your eyes
And blow them whichever way the wind is pointing.
If there's water, sleeping water,
Bring the root of a flower that hasn't drunk for a month.

When you reach the bones,
And you haven't got a dog with you,
And you haven't got a pine coffin
And a cart pulled by oxen to make them rattle,
Slip them quickly under your skin.
Next time you hunch your shoulders
You'll feel them pressing against your own.

It's now pitch dark.

Slowly and with patience
Search for its heart. You will need
To crawl far into the empty heavens
To hear it beat.

What Simic describes in the poem, "Dismantling the Silence" (CP 31), can be called a strange mixture of a surgical procedure and a magical rite. The quest for silence is compared to the dissection of a body. There are "ears", a "belly", "bones" and a "heart". The poet tries to dismember the body until he reaches the core of it. His method is similar to that of a surgeon. The image of an operation shows that the poet makes use of a method in his search for the heart. But the method is not purely based on a rational procedure. The process resembles much more a magical incantation. The "whistle", which is used as a knife, and the poet's proposals about what to do with the "bones" intensify the strangeness of the operation.

The interview in *Crazy Horse* (1972), shows that silence is important for Simic. However, he explains that "of course, the paradox is that neither is there such a thing as silence..." (UC 6). The state of silence, the state of concentration, as in "The Roach" (WGS 16), is a tool to get as near to the heart of the things as possible. Silence, once it is dismantled, dissected and examined, has a voice. This is the paradox. The revelation that silence has a voice of its own makes Simic believe that the world around us can be understood. As the mysterious procedure indicates, the heart of silence cannot be grasped easily.

In poems such as "Evening" (WGS 28), "Poem" (WGS 22), "Summer Morning" (WGS 2-3) and "A Thousand Years With Solitude" (WGS 41), Simic describes his poetical method. Here, he states his profound belief that contact with the world is possible. Although the world and the mind are two different entities, Simic seems to be convinced that with the help of silence, concentration and the will to identify, he can bridge the gap between the inside and the outside. These poems read like an *ars poetica* of his later poetry. They are almost theoretical summaries in which the poets states what his writing is all about. It is a surprising fact that Simic, already in his early stage, is able to talk about his poetic method on a meta-level. The fact that Simic in *What the Grass Says* (1967), *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969) and *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), repeatedly focuses on the importance of silence and solitude is a sign that the poet has to convince himself of his own method. Simic had to assure himself of his own poetic technique. The only way to prove to himself that his intellectual procedure was truthful was to write this kind of poetry. Once he realised that his approach worked out, he stopped writing about it. In his later poetry, especially after *White* (1972), the poet rarely comes back to this kind of meta-explanation. In his later

poetry, Simic seems to be sure of his poetic method and instead of writing about it in his poetry, he makes use of it.

Most of his essays, which were written after the completion of *White* in 1972, are concerned with his ideas about poetry. In the essay, "Notes on Poetry and Philosophy" (1984), where Simic writes about his relation to the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, he cites Harold Rosenberg. "It is the hardship of the times that before an artist can fashion an icon he must compose the theology that his icon will reinforce" (WWSF 62). Without a theology of the world as a whole, the poet seems to lack the firm intellectual and emotional ground that he needs. Although to form a theology, to create a theory is "the hardship of the times", it is still a necessity. It seems that out of this need Simic repeatedly circled around the ideas of silence and solitude in his early poetry. A clear vision, even if it tries to incorporate paradoxical points of view, seems to be a *conditio sine qua non* of writing.

In his first three books Simic strives for the reunion with the outside world. Not only does he try to understand nature, the living world around him, he also tries to understand death and violence. Here, certainly, his experience during the Second World War as a child in Yugoslavia plays an important role. But in his war poetry Simic is never specific as far as time and place are concerned. His war poetry, though one can assume that it is based on his early experience, is not concerned with a specific war. Rather, Simic tries to convey a universal feeling about war and violence from the point of view of the victim. There is a strong sense of disapproval. The fear and pain and meaninglessness of the killings emerge as a strong motive as in "Hearing Steps" (WGS 19).

> Someone is walking through the snow:
> An ancient sound. Perhaps the Mongols are migrating again?
> Perhaps, once more we'll go hanging virgins
> From bare trees, plundering churches,
> Raping widows in the deep snow?
>
> Perhaps, the time has come again
> To go back into forests and snow fields
> Live alone killing wolves with our bare hands,
> Until the last word and the last sound
> Of this language I am speaking is forgotten.

The unspecified person who walks through the snow and creates a crushing sound, which reminds the poet of war, triggers a chain of violent images. The sound of the man walking is ancient. And the poet thinks of

moving Mongolian hordes. The reference to the Mongols, who were famed for their cruelty and aggressiveness and success in war and who, because of their cruel efficiency, forced the Chinese to build the Great Wall, is a metaphor that war is inherently human. The question "perhaps the Mongols are migrating again?" evokes the idea that war is not a thing of the past. The Mongols could migrate again and devastate the world anew with their destructive power. The Mongols, who stand for the horror of war, destructiveness and suffering, are not banished to history books and their destructive power could reappear. War, for Simic, has always been a part of mankind and will remain so. Therefore, Simic can go back to the time of the Mongolian hordes to illustrate the universal horror of war, which was also his horror when he was a child in Yugoslavia. His personal experience, thus, is generalised.

In the third line of the first stanza the poet asks himself if "perhaps, once more we'll go hanging virgins". By the use of the pronoun "we", the poet also asks himself if he would kill, realising that he himself — "perhaps" — would not be able to fight the instinct of war, the inexplicable need for destruction. There is a sense that violence is imminent, that it can lure everybody. In the second stanza, the poet states clearly that war is no option for him, that violence has to be suppressed.

War leads back to the wilderness. The war, with its brutality and meaninglessness, urges the poet and man in general to leave civilisation. Time, as Simic suggests, has come again to enter the woods. Man will again be compelled to kill wolves with his own hands and, consequently, he will be doomed to lose the quality that makes him civilised: language. War, as Simic suggests, is diametrically opposed to the concept of poetry and language. It leads to the capitulation of the intellect. Language falls into oblivion.

The structure of "Hearing Steps" (WGS 19) is not satisfactory. The poem, though short, is not compact. The images are not repeated or extended, as in his later poetry. The rhythm is anything but tempting. Simic tells a story. Many ideas are evoked without being elaborated: "Mongols", "virgins", "church", "woods", "wolves" and "language". Though it might be argued that "virgin", "church", "woods" and "wolves" are connected to each other, Simic fails to concentrate and expand these metaphors. The images he evokes are not repeated or echoed in a subtler way as in his later poetry or as he tentatively shows in "Poem" (WGS 22). The poem "Hearing Steps" (WGS 19) shows that Simic is still a young poet who is more concerned with ideas than with style. Numerous ideas are put forward, yet the connections between these ideas and images are not elaborated carefully.

In the interview with *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic explains how he himself is surprised about the extent of violence that appears in his early poetry.

> I was astonished when I first detected it while writing the poems. All the violence. And I thought of myself as meek. But there it was, no doubt about it. Violence is a kind of pathetic, perverted attempt to feel. The poems try to understand its origins, to see the consequences, to exorcise its demons. I hope nobody gets the impression that I'm glorifying it. (UC 5)

Simic wishes to expel and "to exorcise" violence. However, he feels attracted to it. His fascination though is directed towards the understanding of violence. He wants to understand the origins of violence and to look at its impact on the world. To understand violence means to "exorcise", to get rid of violence. His analysis leads him to the knowledge that violence is "a kind of ... perverted attempt to feel". Violence stands in opposition to his understanding of the world. While violence is a "pathetic" way to feel, Simic wants to understand the world in an *authentic* manner. The pathos of violence is an attitude that Simic defies as it gives, ultimately, an inadequate view of the world.

In "Meat" (WGS 13) and "Butcher Shop" (WGS 14), in *What the Grass Says* (1967), as well as in *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969) and *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), the poet often refers to violence or brutality. It does not always imply war. Sometimes, as in "Meat" (WGS 13), the poet tries, by looking at a dead pig on hook, to understand himself and his origins.

1
Hang the meat on the hook
So that I may see what I am.

Hang that dying pig,
I want to see breath shake off
The heaviness of the flesh.

2
Scalded, guts cleaned,
The pig hangs.
The heaviness of it
Like the weight of a man
Who has turned to go
With grief in his heart.

3
I am baptized in this sight,

As when a child immersed in water
Feels the hand of death
At its throat.

The poet, with an imperative voice, wants to see the pig on the hook in order to realise what he is himself. He wants to explore death, to "see breath shake off", so that he is able to understand that he himself is a mortal creature. The killing of the pig serves as a means of knowledge. The poet, who compares the scalded meat of the pig with "a man / Who has turned to go / With grief in his heart", seems to feel that the pain of the animal is in some way similar to that of man. Man and the pig become equal. The dying of the pig serves him as an example of his own mortality. The sight of the flesh reminds him of his own flesh and his own vulnerability.

This knowledge is compared by the poet in the third stanza with the act of baptising. In this moment the poet seems to enter a new stage in his life. Or, like the child who is initiated by this rite into the Christian world, the poet experiences an initiation into the secrets of death. He feels "the hand of death / At his throat". His wish, in observing the dying pig, was to get at the secret of death. Thus, the violence in "Meat" (WGS 13) is used by the poet as a means of achieving knowledge. The method is similar to "The Roach" (WGS 16) where the poet, wishing to enter into a contact with the world, longs for penetration.

In "Meat" (WGS 13), which consists of fifteen lines, Simic uses an unrhymed short form. This form, which he will often use in his later poetry, suits his purposes best as it allows him to divide his material neatly in three to four stanzas. In the first stanza Simic uses the imperative form followed by detailed observations in the second stanza. In the last stanza Simic provides a conclusion. The poem thus receives a clear structure and follows a logical pattern. The fact that the poet numbers his stanzas supports this idea. Though the poem is short, Simic uses once again repetition ("heaviness", "hang") to make the poem more compact. The form of the poem is somewhat rigid, yet, Simic, with the two similes that are placed at the end of the second and third stanzas, offers some variation. Both similes work as realisations and contrast to the previous line or lines that either are observations or statements. In the last stanza Simic works with the contrasts life and death, as he juxtaposes "baptised" and "child" to the "hand of death". This gives the poem an epigrammatic turn at the end, but it fails to loosen the somewhat rigid structure of the poem.

Early critics described *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), which comprises some of the poems of his first two books plus eight new poems, as original, strange and refreshing. Especially the surreal character of his poetry was often hailed by the critics and deemed exhilarating. John W. Charles says of *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), that it is "a very good

book, worth slow reading".[25] With the publication of his first book of poetry Simic was welcomed by the critics as a promising writer. In one of the earliest analysis of his work, William Matthews, explains that "I found *What the Grass Says* exciting, even though most of the poems struck me as false....I am impatient to read more of his poems, and I hope he will give over the dreams of inert silence".[26] Although Matthews is correct in his analysis on the prevailing idea of silence and smallness that reigns in Simic's early work, the critic deduces the wrong conclusions. "I think Simic's poems about the stillness and smallness of nature are intended to be about the possibility of leading a spiritual life".[27] This is not so. Simic, as we have seen, tries to establish a contact between the inanimate life outside and the animate life inside. Simic does not propagate a modern form of escapism. The silence is a tool to understand the world.

The early criticism can be generally described as emotive. Most critics, such as Diane Wakoski, find his poetry fascinating, although many admit to being unable to understand what Simic actually wants to say. "I have not yet decided whether Charles Simic is America's greatest living surrealist poet, a children's writer, a religious writer, or simple minded. My decision in this matter is irrelevant actually because, whatever he is, his poetry is cryptic and fascinating", Wakoski explains in 1971.[28] Most of the early criticism is concerned with Simic's eccentric images, his fairy-tale style and his "deliberately restricted vocabulary", as John W. Charles phrases it in his review of *Dismantling the Silence* (1971).[29] Simic's use of folk imagery is seen as an enrichment to the American literary scene. His poetry is termed playful, amazing, kaleidoscopic, refreshing and thrilling. Most of the critics wonder how an immigrant from Yugoslavia could have become a poet in such a short time. All in all, the first receptions of Simic's work revel in the enigmatic and mysterious imagery of his work without trying or being able to explain it. Simic himself is at the beginning an enigma, profiting from his unfamiliar and refreshing style.

While most critics label him as a surrealist writer, Simic does not see himself so. Nevertheless, he admits that surrealism had a great influence on him. In the interview with Dodd and Plumly (1972) Simic elaborates on that:

> I don't know about being original. Much of that comes by the way of surrealism. What I like about surrealism is really when the

[25] John W., Charles, "Review of *Dismantling the Silence*", *Library Journal*, 95, 1 April 1971, 1273.
[26] William, Matthews, "*What the Grass Says*", *Lillabulero* 2, 43.
[27] Matthews, 42.
[28] Diane, Wakoski, "Songs and Notes", *Poetry*, 118, September 1971, 355.
[29] Charles, 1273.

> archetypal surfaces. Of course the surrealists didn't try to organize that, but it seems to me inevitable that they would discover the object, as indeed they have. So, in talking about originality, most of that has its roots right there. At the same time I feel to be in that tradition. (UC 20)

In the same interview Simic continues:

> No, I don't think of myself as a surrealist. I don't think of myself as anything. But I would say my greatest debt is to surrealism. Now, surrealism is more interesting in what it wanted to accomplish than in what it actually accomplished. (UC 20)

Though Simic admits that his writing is indebted to surrealism, he still feels that there is a difference between its style and his. "The archetypal", for which surrealism strives, is what the poet deems interesting. The fundamentals of our psyche, the buried images that the surrealists tried to dig out, fascinate Simic. Obviously, their quest and Simic's intention to establish a kind of contact with an unknown world are similar. However, the surrealists sought the unconscious, as the French poet, André Breton, argues in his "Manifesto" in 1924: "The poet of the future will surmount the irreparable divorce of action and dream".[30] Simic, on the other hand, strives to establish a contact with the world outside of him. Dreams and the unconscious appear in his poetry, as for example, in "Dream-Tree" (WGS 36). But the "I" that appears in Simic's poetry is usually awake, conscious of his surroundings and thinking. His journeys into the unknown do not lack the fantastic, surprise or vivid imagination. But the fact that the poet hardly ever sets his poetic musings in the context of dreams shows that his method is a different one. An example of surrealist poetry, the first stanza of Bravig Imbs' poem "Sleep", illustrates this fact. [31]

> slowly the ponderous doors of lead imponderous
> pushed by a wedging force unthinking opened
> how like a cloud I floated down the dim green air
> unthinking of the soft violence of odorous winds
> the falling plaint of hidden violins

Imbs starts his poem by using a metaphor to describe the process of falling asleep. He expands the metaphor, changes the image in order to give

[30] André, Breton, "Manifesto", *English and American Surrealist Poetry*, ed., Edward B. Germain, London, Penguin, 1978, 31.
[31] Germain, 58.

the reader a vivid impression of this process. In the *What the Grass Says* (1967), *Somewhere Among Us a Stone is Taking Notes* (1969) and *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), Simic, in contrast to Imbs, usually starts out with a simple description. Examples are "Hang the meat on the hook", "Sometimes walking late at night", "When I see a roach", "When I eat pork" or "Someone is walking through the snow". Simic gives the reader a tangible starting point. From there he starts his observation. Only after pointing to a concrete detail does the poet start to use similes and metaphors. As he explores the world around him — in contrast to Imbs, who describes the inner world of sleep —, Simic needs to be initially specific. But once Simic enters into contact with the world his images resemble those of the surrealists. In "Spoon" (CP 35) and "Ax" (CP 39), the poet proceeds like this:

An old spoon,
Chewed,
Licked clean,

Polished back
To its evil-eyed
Glow,

Eyeing you now
From the table,
Ready to scratch

Today's date
And your name
On the bare wall.

The poet, in a sudden and unexpected turn, after licking the spoon clean, transforms the frosted glow of the spoon into something "evil-eyed". This move from simple description to suggestive imagery is sudden, but the reader is not lost as in Imbs' poem. In the example of Imbs, the leap is not realised within but at the start of the poem. The reader of Imbs' poem has, apart from the title, nothing to relate the metaphors to. He is confronted with the distilled imagination of the poet. In Simic's case the reader is guided by details of the outer world. Simic's metaphoric leap can be traced back to a thing. This is the fundamental difference between Simic's poetry and surrealism.

As far as the "archetypal" is concerned, similarities can be observed between Simic's poetry and surrealism. Simic, like Breton, experiences a divorce between two worlds. While Breton locates the tension between the

conscious and the unconscious, Simic experiences a divide between the world and the mind. The experience of something lost and the search for contact with that lost world unites Simic and the surrealists. But Simic does not look for the archetypal in dreams and visions. "The unconscious mind I think is important, but not dreams" (UC 51), Simic argues in an interview with students in 1980. Simic argues that he is a poor dreamer. But the unconscious, nevertheless, plays an important role. "I think it's really a question of trusting your unconscious. At some points as you look at that page and those groups of words, something leaps out of somewhere inside yourself and says 'frog wings'" (UC 51). Simic relies on the unconsciously working mind to help him create the imaginative leaps.

> You have to trust in that moment, and you have to be prepared to go that way. But clearly it is unconscious; it doesn't come from anything rational. It's a kind of spontaneous combustion, a chemical reaction to what is on that page. But not dreams. I just don't have them as material. I'm impoverished that way. (UC 51)

The unconscious serves as a means to create poetry. It is not the unconscious that Simic wants to know. He uses the unconscious to achieve his goal. Simic speaks of spontaneity, of a "chemical reaction". This is the moment of surprise in his poetry. Not only the reader, but the poet himself is astonished by the thought that suddenly lights up. That is when the spoon suddenly looks "evil-eyed".

The style in his first three books is simple but not flat. The syntax is often prose-like. Rhyme is hardly ever used. The sentences are short and staccato-like. And his poems are usually short. The surrealist quality of his poetry, the unexpected turns that happen in most of his poems, give his early work a depth that is far from naive. These turns and twists and unexpected changes in imagery give his poetry its peculiar tone. Surprise is a key feature of his style.

Simic does not give extremely detailed descriptions of his world. He uses a noun to describe his surroundings. Adjectives are sparse in his poetry. There is a sense of reduction. He works like a caricaturist who uses only a small number of brush strokes to make his point. Simic's poetic interest does not lie in a photographic reproduction of what he sees and hears. His focus is on the impact the world has on him. The strangeness and originality of his poetry lie in the juxtaposition of the everyday and the fantastic.

I hear a butterfly stirring
Inside a caterpillar,
I hear the dust talking

Of last night’s storm. (CP 30)

The poetic quality is not achieved in the first line of the stanza. Only the second line, where the poet shows that his thought about the butterfly was evoked by the sight of a caterpillar, makes the poem interesting. The "dust", which talks of "last night’s storm", gives the stanza its fantastic tone. The simplicity of the language stands in sharp contrast to the idiosyncratic juxtapositions. It is this personal view of the things and their inter-relatedness that makes his poetry interesting and original.

Simic’s first three books can be grouped together as they all share the predominant idea of the unification between mind and world. The object poems provide the fundamental contact with the outside world that is necessary for the poet. Simic, at the beginning of his career, wishes to reach the ultimate essence of being. His project is the translation of "our mute experience" into words. Once he establishes this necessary contact with the outside, he is able to pursue more complex issues. In the first three books the reader can also detect his interest in violence and war. But these ideas will emerge stronger in his later poetry. The years 1967 to 1971 can be summed up as the time in which Simic builds the groundwork of his universe. He sets out to understand the being of simple things such as knives, spoons or shoes and is able to show that he is able to communicate with these objects. Once he has transcended this threshold, he can continue to expand his work.

In his fourth book of poetry Simic’s style changes. In the poem *White* (1972), which also serves as the title of the book, the poet tries, for the first time in his career, to construct a long poem. As he argues in the interview with Dodd and Plumly (1972): "I wrote one kind of long poem, *White*, but it’s not really a true long poem because the individual sections are simply lyrical passages that connect by virtue of the subject matter" (UC 24). The language in *White* (1972) is more elusive, although simplicity remains a trade-mark of his style.

That your gaze
Be merciful,

Sister, bride of the first
Windless, Spring day.

Mild nurse, show me
The place of slaves,

Teach me the song
That makes a man raise

His glass at dusk
Until a star dances in it. (W 21)

In the best of his early poems Simic usually sticks to one subject and works with one group of familiar images in order to heighten the intensity of the moment. The poem, *White* (1972), shows a more extravagant use of images, but Simic still sticks to his method of developing his poems around a central image or idea. The words are still simple, yet, the juxtapositions are strikingly surprising and more difficult to interpret. The "sister" of the second stanza turns into a "bride" and then into "mild nurse" in the third stanza that should teach the poet a "song" until a star dances in a glass. Simic is talking about a *muse*, who inspires him to write verse. He avoids the obvious term and evokes different women figures instead. The term *muse* seems anachronistic and too simplistic. The terms "sister", "bride" and "nurse", which all point to the image of the *muse*, add new qualities to the concept of the inspiring goddess: the tender friendship of a sister, the loving care of a bride and the helpful hand of a nurse. By omitting the term *muse* Simic can give the poem more breadth as far as images and associations are concerned. Circling around the idea of *muse* also helps the poem to hold together. In contrast to his earlier poetry, "White" incorporates more images. But he has learned to keep the structure of the poem tight and compact. This extensive use of images gives *White* (1972) a nervousness that contrasts with his earlier work, where the use of images is more restricted and less sophisticated.

The long poem, "White" (1972), is made up of three parts. The first two parts consist of ten ten-line lyrics each. The third part is made up of two twenty-line poems. The poem as a whole is about the difficulty of writing, of being inspired and finding the right images. It is a poem about poetry, about the act of writing. It is also a poem in which Simic tries to sum up his poetic achievements.

> I also consider it to be a kind of an end to my object poems. A final statement of that impulse. That whole need, to find that, to express that, all that was gathered up and came together in this poem. I haven’t done any object poems, any poems of this nature, since. Something ended there. (UC 32)

White (1972), as the poet suggests in an interview with George Starbuck (1975), is a "final statement" of his early impulse to write object poems. In these poems, as in "Ax" (CP 39), "My Shoes" (CP 38), "Knife" (CP 36-37), "Fork" (CP 34) and "Spoon" (CP 35), the poet attempts to enter into communion with the objects. The image that arises out of that contact, he

argues, is a sign that "I feel in tune with whatever is out there, what I'm observing or thinking about". In *White* (1972), the poet does not try to reach a tangible object. He tries to depict formlessness. It is a colour that he intends to catch, and yet the colour that he uses as the title for the poem only serves him as a word for what he is after. White, which is no colour and yet the sum of all colours, receives the status of a symbol. As a symbol it stands for the invisible, which the poet tries to make visible by the means of poetry. White is the equivalent of silence. White is the absence of colour, silence is the absence of sound. White, therefore, corresponds to Simic's notion of silence. *White* (1972), is Simic's most forceful attempt to translate his theoretic thinking about poetry into a poetic form. The poem, *White* (1972), is mainly about composition and the difficulty of distilling the unsubstantial and silent moment of experience into poetry.

In his essay "Composition" (1976-83), Simic writes about the complexity of the act of writing.

> The act of composition is fatefully tied to the quality of introspection. To look within and catch oneself existing — the pressure of that inwardness as a kind of cause and realisation that one lives in two worlds, one of which is shared and communicable, and the other which accompanies it like a shadow. And further — the possibility of making that relationship conscious, of acknowledging the duality, of submitting to its drama. (UC 110)

In the same essay Simic continues:

> In any case, the great wish is to make visible, to let the spirit of the occasion manifest itself. A poem which would be a threshold between worlds, where the poet is simply the ceremonial doorman. (UC 112)

The image of white stands for the inwardness, for "the spirit of the occasion", for the moment of experience that Simic wishes to capture. The poet realises with the help of introspection his essential invisibility, his whiteness, his incommunicability. The world outside with its tangible objects, facts and figures, its communication, differs greatly from the inside. This is the dual conception of Simic's world: the world that is understandable with everyday words and the world that is only reachable by poetry. The invisibility of our inwardness is the result of the difficulty of finding the right words to express the spirit of the moment. Simic's quest is to find a language to turn this essential whiteness into something colourful. The silence of our inner being should receive a voice.

In the first poem of *White* (1972), the poet focuses on this idea.

Out of poverty
To begin again:

With the color of the bride
And that of blindness,

Touch what I can
Of the quick,

Speak and then wait,
As if this light

Will continue to linger
On the threshold. (W 11)

There is a sense that the poet wants to start all anew. The new beginning is radical, comparable to Descartes' *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, where the philosopher, plagued by doubts, seeks to find that which cannot be doubted anymore. Simic, it seems, also wants to start without preconceptions. He wants to commence at the beginning: "With the color of the bride", white, and "that of blindness". One can assume that Simic is pointing to the white paper. Blindness refers to introspection. The concentrated mind works best with eyes closed. It shows the poet in front of his desk, trying to write. "What I was after was essentially white, basically the page, a blankness, which then gets scribbled up in some way", Simic tells Starbuck (1975). The poet begins in poverty, without ideas. The first thing that occurs is a "touch". Simic is not specific in this poem. The notion of the "touch" remains vague. Read in the context of his early work, one can suppose that Simic means an object or a moment of experience in general. Only by touching real things is he able to write poetry. Reality, the world outside, is a constituent part of his poetry. And in the fourth stanza the poet speaks and wishes that by virtue of this utterance the "light", which again remains unspecified, will stop for a moment "on the threshold". As Simic indicates in the essay "Composition" (1976-83), the poem works as a threshold between the inner and the outer world. The poem works as the boundary and simultaneously as a connecting link between two separate worlds. With his hushed utterance, "speak", the poet hopes to establish the connection between the inside and the outside.

Here, Simic, unlike in his first poems, does not indicate an object to which the metaphors could be related. In the course of the poem the images reappear or ideas that are stated in one poem are sometimes taken over in

the following lyric. Simic states in the interview with Starbuck: "I resisted on purpose any narrative element. Only juxtaposition to produce a resonance, a chord" (UC 32). The poem as a whole does not read like a story. Much more, it reads like collection of wildly strewn thoughts that are bound together by the echo of the colour white.

All that is near
I no longer give it a name

Once a stone hard of hearing.
Once sharpened into a knife.

Now only a chill,
Slipping through.

Enough glow to kneel by and ask
To be tied to its tail

When it goes marrying
Its cousins, the stars. (W 13)

Simic abstains from the act of naming things like stones and knives as he did earlier. He wants, as he indicated in the first poem, to begin out of poverty. He first wishes to catch the invisible, the white. This attitude turns the stone, which once was "hard of hearing" and then received the function of a tool, into a feeling of "chill". This is how the poet perceives the stone now. The stone is reduced to its essential coldness in the poet's perception. But he sees enough of the " glow to kneel by". The use of the word "glow" shows how Simic's style has become more extravagant and sophisticated. By the simple use of contrast, which binds two ideas together and simultaneously separates them, Simic is able to move from the chilling stone to stars. The imaginative leap does not tear the poem apart. On the contrary, it shows how Simic has matured, how he has learned to successfully create a dazzling effect.

The line "enough glow to kneel by" also shows that the poet wants to be led, that the poetry he intends to write is something which does not purely spring from a rational root. The poet remains passive and waits for the glow to carry him away. "You have to trust in that moment, and you have to be prepared to go that way" (UC 51). The "glow", once it is followed, can help the poet to reach the "stars". There is an awareness that by the act of abstaining from naming things, the poet can be lifted to other regions. Avoiding preconceptions enables Simic to heighten his awareness of things. The fact that the poet uses the image of a "stone" at the beginning

of the poem and ends it with "stars" underlines this fundamental idea that the unconscious can help us to reach unknown worlds.

White (1972) is full of allusions to writing. "There are words I need / They are not near men" (W 23). Or, "I bring you, wrapped in my heart, / Like in a clean handkerchief: / Words — divining herbs" (W 19). The words that Simic is looking for are difficult to find, if not impossible, as the first quote indicates. The second example shows how much care the poet takes to pick the right words. They are compared to "divining herbs", indicating their rarity and powerful impact. In addition, the image of the "herbs" hints at the idea that words have a capacity to heal. They work like a medicine. It might be argued that, in a rather elusive way, the poet tries to point to the fact that the language of poetry is able to heal the wound that man has to endure due to the separation between the mind and the world.

Simic has a new style in *White* (1972). In the interview with Starbuck (1975), Simic indicates that "what I *tried* to do, I tried to write a sequence which would be extremely lyrical, working from various angles" (UC 28). In the poem Simic tries to tackle the notion of white from various perspectives. The notion of white is put in relation to the whiteness of the page. Simic describes snow-bound landscapes (W 29) and the colour of winter (W 19). White is put into connection with breath (W 41). In *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic attributes this change to the influence of the American poet Theodore Roethke (1908-1963).

> I'd say "The Lost Son" and "Praise to the End" were most important to me. Attacking a subject from different angles, juxtaposing with great freedom, making unexpected imaginative leaps and then arranging the whole poem cyclically, struck me at the time as an ideal way to avoid obvious narrative development. (UC 4)

The essence that Simic distils out of the work of Roethke characterises his own poetry. He tackles subjects from several points of view, combines images with a sense of anarchy and jumps around to create an effect of surprise. But the most important thing is that Simic tries to arrange the poem "cyclically". In *White* (1972), the third part of the poem refers to the first two parts.

While the first two parts of the poem are entitled by numbers, the third part is entitled "What the White Had to Say" (57). In this part all the images the poet used in the first twenty poems reappear, giving the whole poem a density and a cyclical structure.

> Because I am the bullet
> That has gone through everyone already,

I thought of you long before you thought of me.
Each one of you still keeps a blood-stained
handkerchief
In which to swaddle me, but it stays empty
And even the wind won't remain in it long.
Cleverly you've invented name after name for me,
Mixed the riddles, strung your proverbs,
Shook your magic-charms in a tin cup,
But I do not answer back even to your curses.
For I am nearer to you than your human stench,
One sun shines on us both through a crack in the roof.
A spoon brings me through the window at dawn,
A plate shows me to the four walls
While with my tail I swing at the flies.
But there is no tail and the flies are your thoughts.
(W60)

The joy of words as they are written,
The ear that got up at four in the morning
To hear the grass grow inside a word. (W 61)

In the last part of the work, Simic refers back to the images used earlier in the poem. White's answer works like an echo, where the images that were initially used reappear again. The handkerchief, which in the fifth poem (W 19) is used by the poet, re-emerges, although it is blood-stained now. The bullet in the first sentence is already hinted at in the first poem of the second part, where the poet asks "what are you up to son of a gun?" (W 35). And the "tail", which the poet uses as a means to fly to the "stars" in the second poem of the first part (W 13), also resurfaces, stressing the cyclical aspect of the poem. Some passages are reminiscent of poems in his first three books. Simic transcends the poem *White* (1972) altogether in order to incorporate some of his earlier poems in the address of White. "To hear the grass grow" certainly reminds the reader of the title of his first book of poetry, *What the Grass Says* (1967). The cyclical structure helps Simic to construct a long poem. Without the address of "white" the poem would be too loose. The short lyrical passages, although they are connected, would not hold together.

The notion of "white" still remains unresolved. This certainly is Simic's intention. "White" is essentially absence and silence. Although it answers back, it still remains enigmatic and elusive. This is the essence of "white". It is all colours and none. White's answer, which mocks the poet's earlier endeavour by using his imagery, cannot be other than mysterious. "Still, the most beautiful riddle has no answer" (W 61) "white" says by the

end of the poem. The answer of "white" is paradoxically not an answer: "I do not answer back even to your curses". Yet the "white" is nearer than "your human stench". This certainly relates to the citation at the beginning of the third part of the poem, where Simic cites the German mystic, Meister Eckhart: "For how could anything white be distinct from or divided from whiteness?" (W 59). The problem, therefore, is one of knowledge. How can that which does not differ from its surrounding be detected as something different? How can something that does not answer except in riddles be realised? The most beautiful riddle, as "white" suggests, remains unresolved. "White" is something that cannot be attained easily.

While Simic's early poetry — until *White* (1972) — is rather simple and often straightforward, *White* (1972) shows a new complexity and heterogeneity. In Simic's work the poem stands out for its length and because of the fact that it marks a vital change in his poetic development. It can be argued that this poem was a point of crisis in Simic's career. As he tells Starbuck, it took him "about a year to write it and it went through many, many versions" (UC 27). In fact, Simic has published the work twice and now dates it 1970 - 1980. And the poet himself thinks of it as "his favourite poem" (UC 29). *White* (1972) is a kind of threshold between his early poetry and his later work which is increasingly personal. It is a break with his early poetry and also a connecting link. *White* is both the end of Simic's early phase and the beginning of his next phase. The poem is at once a summary and a renunciation of his early poetry. The new poems that he writes after *White* (1972) have a stronger narrative element and focus more on human beings and history than on nature and objects.

IV Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk

From the point of view of ideas, *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) breaks new ground. Simic turns, for the first time in his career as a poet, to the description of people. In his poem "George Simic" (RPLGM 43), he pays tribute to his father, calling him a "captain" and a "fisherman, alone". This poem shows Simic's growing interest in his own past. Simic starts to draw on his early childhood memories and begins to think about his own origins. In the poem "Charles Simic" (RPLGM 40), the poet observes himself and describes himself as "a sentence". While Simic in his early poetry focuses on the things around him, in his fifth book of poetry, he tends to look more into himself. This curiosity about his past leads him eventually to the poetry of war, which becomes more dominant in his sixth book of poetry, *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980). This concern about his past is not only reflected in the fact that Simic changes his perspective and begins to explore his own memories. The interest in his past, his origins, also has an impact on his style. As Simic becomes more concerned with people, a stronger narrative element can be detected in his poetry.

While writing *White* (1972), Simic repeatedly states that his poetry was influenced by the work of the American poet, Theodore Roethke. In *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic describes Roethke's influence:

> Roethke's care for sharply observed detail, the primeval imagery and the simplicity of language, seemed to offer a way out of abstractions with which my early poetry was cluttered. Finally, he is responsible for my interest in nursery rhymes, fairy tales, riddles, proverbs, magic formulas, jump-rope rhymes and folklore in general. I still draw strength from that kind of material. (UC 4)

Roethke's influence becomes stronger in *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974). In "Two Riddles" (RPLGM 26) and "Solving the Riddle" (RPLGM 28-30) as well as in "Chicken Without a Head" (RPLGM 67-70) and "Brooms" (RPLGM 21-24), the ideas of magic and mystery take centre stage. The analysis of Roethke's poetry and the activity of translating Serbian poetry both intensify Simic's interest for this genre. Roethke's nursery rhymes in *Praise to the End* (1951), urged Simic to intensify his own study of traditional writing, which he had already begun when he started to translate Serbian poetry. The riddles and mythical allusions that can be found in Popa's poetry become an important and constituent part of Simic's work.

Simic's preoccupation with this seemingly anachronistic genre can be explained by his search for an authentic expression of being. It can be

argued that Simic hoped that the study of these poets would help him find a way to reach a deeper level of language that is more apt to describe an emotion or an event while at the same time remaining as simple as possible. It seems that the styles of Popa and Roethke exhibit a genuineness that Simic aims to mimic.

In "Brooms" (RPLGM 21-24), Simic combines his penchant for objects with his new interest. It is a poem that combines two stages of Simic's poetic development. The poem resembles the object poems "Ax" (CP 39), "Spoon" (CP 35) or "Knife" (CP 36-37), and it reveals his effort to fold this new class of metaphors into his work.

1
Only brooms
Know the devil
Still exists,

That the snow grows whiter
After a crow has flown over it,
That a dark dusty corner
Is the place of dreamers and children,

That a broom is also a tree
In the orchard of the poor,
That a hanging roach there
Is a mute dove.

The poem, divided into five parts and consisting of fifteen stanzas, shows another fresh feature of Simic's poetry. His poems become, after the completion of *White* (1972), generally longer. Simic has now the stylistic means to construct longer poems. In *White* (1972), he has learned how a long poem can work without losing the necessary compactness. The fact that Simic tries in the poem "Brooms" (RPGLM 21-24) to tackle the idea of the broom from different vantage points — as he has learned from Roethke — allows him to use more space for his ideas. Simic will return to the short lyric form in *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1983). But between *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* and *Austerities* (1982), he usually writes longer poems. In the aftermath of *White* (1972), Simic may have felt the need to stick to the quasi-epic form.

In the first stanza of "Brooms" (RPGLM 21-24), the broom is personified. Rather than being a passive tool for sweeping up dust, it becomes an agent that "knows" that the "devil exists". The word "devil" reminds one of the role of the broom in fairy tales as a means of transport for a witch. It underlines Simic's predilection for myth and riddles.

However, he does not simply remain within the realm of the fairy tale. Simic compares the broom to a "tree" of the poor in which a roach hangs instead of a dove. Thus he gives the broom an unexpected identity as a surrogate tree for the poor, who — *faute de mieux* — have to dispense with a real tree and make do with this hairy stick. The reference to the poor, though it is done in a humorous way, also shows Simic's awareness of social injustice. Simic's increasing interest in his own past not only reminds him of his war experiences but also of his time when he arrived in the United States with his family, who, though not poor, had only limited financial means. The awareness of poverty is certainly influenced by his early working experience. During his undergraduate years Simic had to take several low paid jobs to earn his living and finance his studies. He worked, for example, as an office boy for the Chicago *Sun Times* and as an editorial assistant for the photography magazine *Aperture*. These experiences certainly increased his sensibility for the poor and their plight. It is not surprising then to find ideas on poverty recurring in his work.

As in *White* (1972), Simic tries to hold the poem together with the subject matter. The image of the broom serves as a starting point for Simic's imaginative voyage. Simic does not restrict himself to one idea. "Brooms" (RPGLM 21-24) is not a description of a real broom, rather the poem offers a kaleidoscopic view of how a broom can be seen. Simic works with associations and tries to point to a series of qualities that a broom can have. The poem works like Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird".[32] The allusion to "crow" and "snow" is certainly a reference to Stevens' poem. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" Stevens plays with the possibilities of how a blackbird can be perceived and what kind of effect the image can have in poetry. In a similar way, Simic tries to explore the secrets of a broom.

In the second part of the poem, Simic once again alludes to the fairy-tale dimension of the broom.

2

Brooms appear in dreambooks
As omens of approaching death.
This is their secret life.
In public, they act like flat-chested old maids
Preaching temperance.

They are sworn enemies of lyric poetry.
In prison they accompany the jailer,

[32] Wallace, Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, New York, Vintage, 1954, 92-95.

Enter cells to hear confessions.
Their short-end comes down
When you least expect it.

Left alone behind a door
Of a condemned tenement,
They mutter to no one in particular,
Words like *virgin wind moon-eclipse*,
And that most sacred of all names:
Hieronymous Bosch.

The brooms signal "death" in "dreambooks". "This is their secret life", as the poet enigmatically continues. The mysterious existence of the brooms, their secret, is what Simic tries to explore. He also offers the obvious, daylight or "public" side of the broom. Here, Simic does not give a pure description of the broom. His imagery, as in *White* (1972), is strong and eccentric. He compares the brush to "flat-chested old maids", thus giving the brooms a humorous rigidity. In the second stanza, he uses the device of personification to depict the broom as an active agent. The broom escorts the jailer and hears confessions. Simic changes the soulless tool into a creature with a spirit. But the words it mutters remain secret and hidden. The reference to the medieval Dutch painter, Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), who is known for his shocking and disturbing images, reinforces the mysterious and strange quality of the broom. The "*virgin*" and the "*moon-eclipse*", which both belong to the standard repertoire of fairy tales and folklore, heighten its mysterious aspect. The secret double-existence of the broom is best illustrated when it speaks to itself "behind a door", in a place where brooms are expected to stand.

Folklore and fairy tales enrich Simic's imagination. The new poems, which exhibit a greater variety as far as subject matter is concerned, show also that Simic writes with greater ease. He now expands on his metaphors and writes longer poems. In the poems of his first phase, Simic usually tries to stick to one image. The intensive studies of Roethke, Serbian folklore and Popa give Simic's poetry a new and unexpected depth, which provide the poet with unexpected possibilities. The use of these new stylistic devices enables Simic to dive into deeper and older layers of language. Although he uses archetypal images to illustrate the secret being of, for example, brooms, Simic does not slide into an antiquated language. In "Brooms" (RPGLM 21-24), Simic always puts the broom in the context of our everyday perception of this object. He tries to combine the obvious and the hidden, the fantastical and the everyday, thus giving his poetry an actual reference and, simultaneously, a mysterious one. His poems are not pure fairy tales. In addition, the tension between the factual description and

the fairy-tale dimension of a broom also creates a comic effect, which in turn increases the complexity of his poetry.

In "The Chicken Without a Head" (RPLGM 67-70), another long poem which consists of seven stanzas, which are each between fifteen and eighteen lines long, Simic adds a joking tone to his mysterious poetry. He uses a motto for this poem by an anonymous writer: "*There's nothing more serious than a joke*". In his essay on Popa (1979), Simic argues that no myth is without a funny bone. "The comic and the mythic strategies are similar, if not identical. The trick is to be literal-minded in the world of multiple metaphors, and fabulous in the face of the literal. The aim is to present the known in terms of the unknown and recover its mythical potential" (UC 92). Simic tries to turn the world upside down in his poetry. The familiar should become strange, and the unfamiliar should be described like something well-known and common. The joke, thus, becomes a means of knowledge. It also throws a new light on what was thought to be known. Describing a familiar thing in unfamiliar terms will help us to sharpen our awareness of the thing in front of us and it urges the reader to question and rethink his attitude towards the world, Simic argues.

When two times two were three,
The chicken without a head was hatched.
When the earth was still flat,
It fell off its edge, daydreaming.
When there were 13 signs in the zodiac,
It found a dead star for its gizzard.
When the first fox was getting married,
It thought itself to fly with one wing.
When all the eggs were still golden,
The clouds in the sky tasted like sweet corn.

In the first line we step into another world, where two times two does not equal four but three. In this illogical realm the chicken is born. This is a world of paradox, similar to that of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, where absurdity reigns and surrealism gains the status of reality. The fox and the golden eggs heighten the fairy tale atmosphere of the poem.

In the following six parts of the poem Simic sends the chicken on a voyage, where it meets a solider whose hair turns white at the sight of this figure. And he lets the chicken sing a "lethal song" and shows it in pursuit of the "invisible" only to let it run back home again to "roost". The motif of the voyage is a feature often encountered in fairy tales. But it is interesting that Simic refers to "song" and the "invisible". In the context of his work it can be argued that the chicken is a fantastic mask for Simic himself. The chicken's song can be compared to Simic's poetry and the animal's "love

with the invisible" corresponds to Simic's quest to catch the invisible as he writes in "Poem" (RPLGM 25), where "the enigma of the invisible" is the "enigma of memory". The chicken is a persona of Simic, his personal joke about himself. Like the chicken, he feels a lack of orientation ("beheaded") and wanders around singing in search for the invisible. The joking spirit of the poem unveils the tragic seriousness of his quest. A forlorn animal in search of his home.

> Ran, and is still running this Good Friday,
> Between raindrops, tripping over its puns,
> Hellfoxes on its trail. (RPLGM 70)

In *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), Simic, for the first time in his poetry, turns towards his own past. While in his early poetry, objects and nature hold a dominant position, in his fifth book of poetry, he returns to his childhood days. One year after the publication of *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), he tells Starbuck (1975) that "for a long time I despised 'poetry of childhood.' It's such an obvious place to begin. And among the places I didn't want to begin were especially, say, things like things that happened to me in Europe, when I was still there, during the Second World War. But suddenly, there they were and I couldn't resist them" (UC 34). In 1974, when *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) was published, Simic was thirty-six years old. The poet had matured by this time. In *White* (1972), Simic had written a *résumé* of his earlier poetry and gradually developed his style. The interest in his own past only surfaced after he had found his own style and after he had extensively explored simple objects and nature. The early poems enabled him to elaborate on his own point of view and to create a firm foothold in the world. But the impulse to write this kind of poetry waned over time. In an interview with Rod Steier in 1977 Simic explains: "The problem with the so-called nature poems is that they generate all that false, easy pantheism and mysticism. Sure, we have such experiences, but they are really rare. I distrust poets who have a mystical experience each time they look at a tree or a falling leaf. It just doesn't happen. It's a kind of fakery... I mean it's harder to deal with a city and that totally fucked up world of super highways, slums, subways, and the poor bastards who have to work every day in that world" (UC 49-50).

In the poem "Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk" (RPLGM 61), Simic tries to describe this new and earlier despised interest in his past.

> Late at night our hands stop working.
> They lie open with tracks of animals
> Journeying across the fresh snow.

They need no one. Solitude surrounds them.

As they come closer, as they touch,
It is like two small streams
Which upon entering a wide river
Feel the pull of the distant sea.

The sea is a room far back in time
Lit by the headlights of a passing car.
A glass of milk glows on the table.
Only you can reach it for me now.

The poem opens in a moment of silence and solitude. It is "late at night" and the poet looks at the palms of his hands. He compares the lines on his palm to animal tracks in the snow and to small streams that enter a "wider river". The image of the river implies a forward movement that is similar to the movement of time. There is a clear sense of direction. But it is not forward. "The pull of the distant sea" is an impulse to dive into the past. The sea is a room "far back in time". In the interview with Starbuck (1975), Simic explains:

> One of the earliest of these poems, earliest-during-the-war, is about the quality of light. I was very young. I didn't understand much about blackouts. It was very dark in 1942. But nevertheless, when I can visualize that quality of light, something comes back. It's the wonder any five-year-old would have, not understanding exactly what it was all about. It may be a couple of years before these things resolve themselves. I work very slowly (UC 34). [33]

What Simic remembers best is the quality of light, which was caused by the headlights of a passing car. On the table stands a glass of milk, the beverage of children, which, in the headlight of the car, seems to shine. Simic combines the light of the car and the glass with a place lit by a glass of milk. The shining milk is a strong image as it combines two incidents into one. Simic is attracted to this peculiar light like a moth. There is an irresistible "pull" that drags him to this place in time. It is an impulse he cannot withstand.

At the age of thirty-six the floodgates of Simic's past slowly open. At that point Simic has become an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire. The childhood in Belgrade and his student years in

[33] Simic, in the interview with Starbuck, refers to the poetry of childhood.

Chicago and New York are over. Simic has settled down and stopped wandering around. This almost sudden halt in his life, after years of wanted and unwanted travelling, seems to have opened his mind for his past. It seems that once he reached this rather comfortable position in life, Simic could allow himself to look back. Although it will take another six years — with the publication of *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980) — before he makes extensive use of his war-time memories, Simic has found another important poetic source for himself. As he admits to Starbuck in 1975, it may take a while until his memories emerge in his poems as he "works very slowly". Simic needs time to order his memories, to filter out the important from the unimportant. But there is a stylistic problem. Simic, as he tells Starbuck (1975), wants to avoid the narrative element. "I am still not happy with these poems. They're coming out too much like stories" (UC 34). Simic does not want to write stories, although some of his later poetry will show a stronger narrative element. He wishes to convey a specific emotional quality, a sense of the moment. In the essay, "Poetry is the Present" (1991), Simic claims that "poetry is the moment, the experience of the naked moment" (UFT 55). In order to capture an instant, Simic cannot and does not use narrative elements. He has to tackle the problem differently and that requires time.

In *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), Simic, for the first time, describes another person in his poem. In "George Simic" (RPLGM 43-46), another long poem, Simic writes an homage to his father.

> Captain,
> what are you doing
> with that cane?
> There are no dogs here anymore.
> The blind-alley has eyes now.
> Did you carve it from our threshold
> while the new owners slept?
> You are its father too;
> it skips ahead of you, chattering.
> When a hump grew on your back,
> a shadow came to be its sister.

The poem is a tribute to his father who has "been gone long" (RPLGM 46). It is an unusually emotional poem, where Simic shows the deep ties that bind him and his father together. In his memoir, "In the Beginning..." (1990), Simic describes the first encounter with his father in New York in 1954 after almost ten years of separation. "I felt comfortable with my father right away.... It was pure joy to be around him then" (WWST 41). The affection, which he shows for his father in "George Simic" (RPLGM 46),

his longing for the time when they were together and spent many nights in bars and restaurants, discussing and drinking, is also a reason why Simic is preoccupied with his past. Simic starts his personal *recherche du temps perdu*.

The tone in the poem "George Simic" (RPLGM 43-46) is intimate. The exclamation "Captain" speaks of respect and affection. The tone of intimacy is also heightened with Simic's use of reduction and allusion. The allusions to "dogs", "alley" and "threshold" point to places in the past and present. The alley, that was blind, obviously a dead-end street, has changed, the dogs are gone and Simic's family does not live in their old house anymore. Times have changed and the father, George, now needs a cane to walk. Simic is not specific as far as the places are concerned. He does not name the city street or describe the house. He only hints at them in a general and, yet, intimate way and is able to create a painful effect that the past has irrevocably gone and the world has changed. The cryptic question "did you carve it from our threshold" remains enigmatic and cannot be interpreted clearly. The sentence heightens the intimate, melancholic atmosphere. The poem reads like a personal letter to his father. The image of the "cane" is used subtly. On the one hand, the word refers to the cane that his father needs now. On the other hand, the description of the cane in the last line — "it skips ahead of you, chattering" — is an allusion to the young Charles Simic. Like the cane now, the young Charles ran ahead of his father and chattered. With the image of the cane Simic is able to combine the present and the past and, thus, achieves a dense structure.

In *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), Simic continues his journey into his own past and starts a fuller exploration of the self. In the interview with Steier (1977), Simic comments upon his changing style in *Charon's Cosmology* (1977).

> The new book is in many ways ... a different book. There are poems that are extremely sparse. There are no jokes and no startling images in them. Many old trademarks are missing. Then, the poems are much more autobiographical than they used to be. This is, of course, not true of the whole book, but the impulse is away from embellishment and towards a greater economy of means. Anyway, that's the hope. (UC 48)

Simic becomes more interested in society. People start to enter into his poetry as in "Auction" (CC 4), where Simic depicts poverty. For the first time, Simic's tone becomes censorious, as in "Progress Report" (CC 15), where he describes and criticises the work in a scientific laboratory. The impulse towards autobiography, the interest in his past, was already present

in his fifth book. But only three years after *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), is Simic able to focus almost exclusively on these ideas.

The movement away from "embellishment" to a style that is sparser, is a direct consequence of his new preoccupation with death, war and social inequality. However, Simic's drive to find startling images for his ideas is still detectable. This is best illustrated in poems such as "Landscape with Crutches" (CC 5), where Simic paints a world in need of support, or "Animal Acts" (13), where a bear eats with a silver spoon or two apes are called "adept at grave digging" and "The Cure" (CC 38), where the poet rubs himself against the "seventy-seven kinds of toads". The poem "Nursery Rhyme" (CC 10) still speaks of Simic's indebtedness to Serbian poetry and the work of Roethke. But death, as the title of the book indicates, dominates. The nakedness of death and the fear it causes cannot be adorned and beautified.

In "Charon's Cosmology" (CC 14), Simic gives his own view of death. The reference to the mythological Greek figure, Charon, still shows his predilection for myth:

> With only his feeble lantern
> To tell him where he is
> And every time a mountain
> Of fresh corpses to load up
>
> Take them to the other side
> Where there are plenty more
> I'd say by now he must be confused
> As to which side is which
>
> I'd say it doesn't matter
> No one complains he's got
> Their pockets to go through
> In one a crust of bread in another a sausage
>
> Once in a long while a mirror
> Or a book which he throws
> Overboard into the dark river
> Swift cold and deep

Charon is not depicted as the god-like figure that he is in Greek mythology. He is similar to a man. There is weakness in him. His lantern is "feeble" and he seems "confused" which side is the world and which Hades. However, Charon does not lose his power, although he has to look for "bread" and "sausage" in the pockets of the dead instead of the traditional

gold coin. He seems impoverished, but his authority, as the last stanza indicates, is intact. The "mirror", the means of self-knowledge and the "book", the means to sum up the history of a life, are carelessly thrown overboard into the river Styx, into forgetfulness. And the river is "cold" and "deep", stressing the adverse nature of death and life. There is obviously nothing that would allow man to escape the fate of forgetfulness. The feebleness of Simic's Charon is a joking device for strengthening the idea that death is inevitable. The figure of Charon might be weak, but his might over life is not reduced. On the contrary, although he seems tired of his work, he does not shudder in the face of the heaps of corpses that he has to ship into Hades. He does his work quietly and steadily and without interruption. Charon resembles an old worker who does his duty mechanically. He might stop for a moment because his back hurts. But he resumes his work and fulfils it.

In "Charon's Cosmology" (CC 14), Simic proves that there is nothing more serious than a joke. The funny description of the weak Charon contrasts sharply with his actual work. And the colloquial tone that is heightened with the repetition of "I'd say" adds to the somewhat nonchalant character of Charon. On the whole, the poem is somewhat too loosely structured, though the apathetic character of Charon is described adequately. The poem is organised more like a short story and it lacks the cyclical aspect. Simic does not come back to the images in the first stanza to elaborate on them. Much more, he evokes new images and, thus, proceeds as in a story. The poet is usually at his best when he is able to give his poems a structure as in *White* (1972) or "George Simic" (RPLGM 43-46), where Simic creates the density by remaining within a confined field of words and ideas. Otherwise, as in "Charon's Cosmology" (CC 14) or "Hearing Steps" (WGS 19), the poems fail to exhibit a tight structure.

In "Eyes Fastened with Pins" (CC 35), Simic depicts death again as a common man. This time he compares the figure of death with a family man.

How much death works,
No one knows what a long
Day he puts in. The little
Wife always alone
Ironing death's laundry.
The beautiful daughters
Setting death's supper table
...
Death,
Meanwhile, in a strange
Part of the town looking for

Someone with a bad cough,
But the address somehow wrong,
Even death can't figure it out
Among all the locked doors...

Death seems tired, feeble and confused. His appearance has nothing fearful or ghost-like. His status is that of a worker who, with his job, has to a feed a wife and daughters. Nevertheless, he fulfils his sombre task and brings death to the sick and old. But in his confusion, which is obviously the result of age and overwork, he seems to lose orientation. It is just the "address" that is "somehow wrong". The consequences, though, are grave. *Errare humanum est* is the Latin proverb. Death does not seem to apply any fixed rule. The wrong person can be chosen by accident as the poem seems to suggest. But the decision is fateful and unchangeable. Death does not await us at a given time. Death may come unannounced because of something as trivial and stupid as death's tiredness. Death's procedure seems to lack a clear reason. The element of chance and unpredictability renders the figure of death once again powerful and mighty. He controls our lives, without giving man the possibility of recognising a pattern in his procedure. He sends us to Hades without an obvious reason and throws our possessions into the river Styx, as "Charon's Cosmology" (CC 14) indicates.

The figure of death, though trivialised, throws a new light on Simic's poetry. With these poems Simic starts to analyse the bleaker side of life. While in his early poetry Simic often centres on images of nature and describes a seemingly intact world, his interest now turns to the misery that cripples the lives of the poor and suppressed. Although the first volume, *What the Grass Says* (1967), already bears traces of his concern for war and poverty as in "War" (WGS 31) and "The Boss Hires" (WGS 31), it is only in *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), that Simic allows these ideas more space.

In "Auction" (CC 4), Simic describes the hardship of life in the city:

The face of a man who can't find a job.
The sky — that ear and eye hospital.
And the streets with their pawnshops, groceries,
poolhalls,
And the streets at each other's throats.

We have one bloody emaciated half-human
Ironing board to sell. We have a skeleton
Of a baby carriage. We have a ringing alarm clock
without hands or numerals,
And a soul, if the devil can still find it.

It’s late. Here comes Mrs. Novak who scrubs
Floors for a living. Here come two female saints
From the altar of the Mulberry Street church.
Here comes the landlord chewing on a gold toothpick.

The face of so and so who can’t find a job.
The sky — that pinball machine slightly tilted ...
And of course, right now in some cellar
They are working over a poor guy who’s got nothing to confess.

Joblessness, poverty, hard physical labour and violence dominate the life in the city. "The face" of the jobless man, the streets at "each other’s throats" and the poor guy who is beaten up in a cellar point to the misfortunes of urban life. Mrs. Novak, the cleaning woman, is juxtaposed to the landlord with his "gold toothpick". The "sky" and the "two female saints" speak of another world and seem to provide a kind of solace. But the sky with its vastness stands in sharp contrast to the narrowness of the streets and the possibilities of the poor. The "female saints" only appear to leave the stage again. They have no consolatory impact. They only affirm their existence but do not provide any help to the people. "Auction" (CC 4), tells of how people have to sell themselves in order to earn a living and to survive. They have almost nothing. And the little they have is "emaciated", feeble like a "skeleton". The "alarm-clock" is in a poor state.

In "Auction" (CC 4), Simic deals "with the city and that totally fucked up world of super highways, slums, subways, and the poor bastards who have to work every day in that world" (UC 50). Though Simic explains that it is harder to write about this world than nature, he has written a fine poem here. Simic uses everyday language ("can’t", "it’s", "so and so") to describe this world in order to illustrate the ordinariness of it. The sentences are also short and staccato. The poem is more dense and the images are more idiosyncratic than in "Charon’s Cosmology" (CC 14). Here, the "streets" and not the people are "at each other’s throats" and the atmosphere of violence and poverty is echoed in the words "bloody", "tilted", "hospital" and "skeleton". Simic also contrasts the world of the poor with the world of religion and the church. The allusion to the "two female saints", nuns, works as a counterpoint to the world of the "pawnshops" and "poolhalls". The image of the nuns — introduced with "soul" and "devil" and later echoed in "altar" and "confess" — heightens the contrast with the world of the poor. The device of contrast that is used in this poem intensifies its density. It can be argued that the allusion to the rich man, hinted at with the help of the synecdoche "gold toothpick", is

simply thrown in because Simic does not elaborate on it. From this point of view, it can be argued, the poem still tries to incorporate too many ideas that are not connected together. The structure crumbles slightly.

The interest in urban life certainly can be traced back to his experiences as a child and youth in Chicago and his time as a student in New York, where Simic lacked money and the comfort of a regular income. If we consider the fact that these poems were written at a time when Simic was already teaching at the University of New Hampshire, we have to acknowledge that the images rise late within Simic's consciousness. Things require time before they resolve themselves to the poet. His interest in injustice, inequality, violence and poverty are also connected to his new curiosity about the past. Simic speaks of experiences that he had as a young man. In "Help Wanted" (CC 12), Simic writes about the difficulty of getting a job. "They ask for a knife / I come running / They need a lamb / I introduce myself as a lamb". He is forced to offer everything he has, adapt to rules over which he has no influence, and he has to downgrade himself when he tries to convince the employer that "chirping and whistling like an aviary" with the "cheeks" of his "ass" is one of his talents. The image of the bare "ass" also shows Simic's defiance and rebellion against this unfair constellation. He criticises the unequal situation that divides the people. The criticism is stronger in *Austerities* (1982). But already in *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), Simic shows his unwillingness to accept a world that allows social differences to grow and gives some people the possibility to live in abundance while the underdogs are forced to endure the burden of poverty.

The spirit of defiance and rebellion surfaces in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), where Simic describes his emancipation from inherited ways of thinking, and outlines his awakening and metamorphosis into a free spirit who does not want to allow other people to restrict his thoughts. In "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), Simic gives his view on freedom and stresses the importance of a personal analysis of the world. History and tradition are put aside. The capacity to experience the world with one's own eyes and to think about it in one's own terms is not only seen as a gift. It is described as a preliminary requirement for authentic living. The poem is a plea for individualism and is, in consequence, a harsh critique of any form of convention. The poem is also a reaction to his Yugoslav past, where Simic has seen the grim consequences of a social system that supported uniformity but sanctioned originality and individuality. The Nazi-regime, which destroyed Belgrade, gave Simic a taste of what enforced conformity can mean. In the interview with Sherod Santos (1984), Simic explains that "I had what Jan Kott calls a 'typical East European education'. He means, Hitler and Stalin taught us the basics" (UC 68). It was obviously this

"education" that helped Simic to understand the importance of freedom and individualism.

It occurs to me now
that all these years
I have been
the idiot pupil
of a practical joker.

Diligently
and with foolish reverence
I wrote down
what I took to be
his wise pronouncements
concerning
my life on earth.
...
It seemed to me
that gradually
my teacher was revealing to me
a pattern,
that what I was being told
was an intricate plot
of a picaresque novel
in instalments,
the last pages of which
would be given over
entirely
to lyrical evocations
of nature.

Unfortunately,
with time,
I began to detect in myself
an inability
to forget even
the most trivial detail.
I lingered more and more
over the beginnings:
the haircut of a soldier
who was urinating
against our fence;
...

In this classroom
austerely furnished
by my insomnia,
at the desk consisting
of my two knees
for the first time
in this long and terrifying
apprenticeship,
I burst out laughing.

The tension in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), arises between the ideas of "pattern" and "detail". The pattern stands for a worldview in which everything can be explained in terms of structure. The world, from this perspective, is a place that can be understood and can offer, as Simic initially naively hopes, a consolatory end. But, "unfortunately", there are details, incidents, images, experiences, which will not fit into an all-consuming pattern. The details defy the logical and fixed form of conventional meaning. While according to the standardised view, wars are reduced to dates and adversaries divided into good and bad, the incorporation of detail poses a problem to the poet. The adversary soldier is not simply reduced to a "tormentor" at whose death the pupil can rejoice. The soldier's "haircut", and his "urinating" do not fit the pattern. These memories cannot be smoothly embedded in a theory of good and bad. The haircut makes the soldier unique and the fact that the soldier is urinating makes him human. The soldier, although he might be an adversary, is a human being. Pattern and detail are antagonists. These terms cannot be resolved, as one stands for generalisation and the other for particularisation. The danger of the pattern is also exemplified by the fact that it is acquired rather than created. The pattern is being taught, while the source of the particular is personal experience and thinking. While the pattern is, from the point of view of the pupil, something that he passively obtains as part of a tradition, the particular demands the active participation and the creativity of the pupil.

The poet bursts out laughing when he realises that his personal experiences differ so much from the standardised view of the pattern, history. His personal view shows him that the accepted and perpetuated interpretation of history is a brutal joke. The simplification, which is a key feature of the pattern, excludes the personal incidents. Only these incidents make up a biography and life. The pattern is seen as a cruel joke that does not allow any personal view. In the face of this realisation the poet can only laugh at his own naivety and stupidity. Years later, when following the break-up of Yugoslavia on the television screen, Simic will once again

point to the difference of pattern and detail. In the essay, "Orphan Factory" (1997), Simic writes:

> We read countless articles about the rational, democratic, and civilised Croats and Slovenes, the secular Moslems, who, thank God are not like their fanatic brethren elsewhere, and the primitive, barbaric, and Byzantine Serbs and Montenegrins.... In the meantime, columns of refugees. An old woman dressed in black is pulling by a rope a small suitcase that lies flat on the ground. Is she a Moslem from Srebrenica or Zepa, or she is one of two hundred thousand cleansed Serbs from Krajina? It makes no difference. (OF 25-26)

The division into good and bad, which parts one people from another, and makes any thorough analysis of the specific situation impossible, leads to a cynical conclusion. Only the individual of a group can be deemed good if the group is deemed good. His suffering can only be accepted as suffering once his group has been granted that right. The individual counts for nothing, only the group does. It is this that Simic has realised in his own classroom and which makes him laugh out loud as he uncovers the stupidity and danger of conformity.

In *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) and *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), Simic slowly shifts his focus from objects and nature to his personal past. This development is gradual. Simic still clings to his objects, but he is able to broaden the dimension of these object poems by the help of folklore and jokes. The poems in these books, that span the years from 1974 to 1977, seem more complicated, but at the same time the poet's intention to dismantle the silence and "to see it face to face" ("Nothing", RPLGM 27) is obvious. The poems are generally longer and often hold together well due to their balanced structure. The imagery as in "Soup" (RPLGM 62-65), where the poet lists the ingredients for this meal ("Take a little backache / melt some snow from the year of your birth"), still show Simic's penchant for startling images that remind the reader of fairy tales. Simic indulges in such colourful, fancy and strange imagery. He intends to shock. The reader is initially allowed to have a good laugh but only to realise: "We'll wash it down / with the ale brewed from the foam / gathered at the mouths / of our old pursuers: / The mad, god-sent, bloodhounds" (RPLGM 64). The last stanza works like a punch line that evaporates the early comic relief.

The surfacing of his experiences as a child in Yugoslavia make his poetry more lively. Compared to the object poems, the war poems are almost refreshingly simple. Simic's poetry on the whole becomes more personal and less detached. David Ignatow remarks about the book

Charon's Cosmology (1977), that these poems "show, for one thing, that it is possible to write intensely personal poetry without placing oneself at the center".[34] And Ignatow is right when he argues that Simic "achieves his successes with the surrealist techniques".[35] Simic has mastered his style to the extent that he is able to be direct without being obvious or plain and without having to resort to clichés. His poems are more densely structured, though several poems, mostly longer ones, such as "The Ballad of the Wheel" (CC 25-26) or "Species" (CC 31-33), are weak because they try to incorporate too many ideas without generating a coherent structure.

In *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980), Simic mainly focuses on war. Some of the poems such as "Begotten of the Spleen" (CBD 20), show Simic's pleasure in creating uncommon metaphors. Others such as "Great Infirmities" (CBD 19), speak of the effect a war can have on a people. In "Baby Pictures of Famous Dictators" (CBD 22), Simic gives us his idea of the "immaculate" beings that dictators supposedly were as babies and in "A Suitcase Strapped with a Rope" (CBD 27), Simic describes, again in a fairy tale-like style, a flight. But Simic is also concerned with history, especially about the way history is presented and how it is perceived.

The ideas that Simic elaborates in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20) reappear in "My Widow" (CBD 26).

A photograph of a woman in black.
I cut her out of a history book.
I talk to her like a lover.
I want to cheer her up.

I set our supper table.
I turn the lights on when the evening comes.
When I turn them off,
I can hear her sigh.

She comes from Poznan.
One of her feet is shorter than the other.
She studied French in school.
She still can recite a bit of Villon.

Now she's walking through the snow.
She's coming my way,
But there's a wolf-headed dog behind her,
And a soldier with high squeaky boots.

[34] David, Ignatov, "Charles Simic's *Charon's Cosmology*", Weigl, 53.
[35] Weigl, 53.

The woman, who the poet cuts out of a history book, where her figure is obviously used to illustrate the horrors of being a refugee, receives a face. In the beginning, when she is only a "woman in black", she seems to be a specimen, a symbol for the suffering of people. Simic's words turn the woman into a human being with a past. His love and his compassion make her palpable. She comes from "Poznan", she learned French, had obviously some love for poetry and she "sighs". The woman in black receives a colouring, her shape becomes more distinct by the poet's musings. But the poet's love and affection for the woman cannot find fulfilment. Though she walks into his direction, she will never reach him. The "soldier" and the "dog" will hinder her from stepping out of history and enter the present. The woman, who is deprived of a future, has to stay in the past and serve as a specimen of suffering and pain.

The poem "My Widow" (CBD 26) is, like "Auction" (CC 4), divided into four four-line stanzas. The lines are short. Each line either ends in a full stop or is divided from the next line through the use of a comma. This short form seems to suit Simic's purposes as he can divide his ideas into separate stanzas and thus achieve clarity. In the first stanza he describes how he contemplates the woman and in the second stanza he describes how he wants to cheer her up. In the third stanza Simic depicts her origins and in the fourth stanza her deadly fate.

Though Simic has written the long poem *White* (1972), the short lyric form dominates his work. Longer poems such as "The Lesson" (CC 18-20) or "Description" (CC 16-17) are rare and they often lack the density and tight structure of the shorter poems. The longer poems read often like epistles due to their colloquial tone and simple use of language. However, Simic likes the longer poems as well. This penchant for writing longer poems that read like stories urged him to use the prose poem form. And it is not surprising that he received the Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for his book of prose poems, *The World Doesn't End* (1989).

Simic is able to create an effect with little means in the short lyric form. He is best when he concentrates on a restricted number of images and elaborates on them as in "Spoon" (CP 35) or "Ax" (CP 39). The epigrammatic endings of his poems and the surprising turns his poems can take certainly show his predilection for the short lyric form. Simic does not have Whitman's cataloguing sensibility. His poems are not about the myriad wonders one can detect in the outside world. Simic's interest is directed towards the inner world. He is occupied with the question of how he perceives the world. In his poetry he is after the description of an emotional state. Simic wants to grasp the moment. Therefore, most of his best poetry is short, similar to the moments that he wishes to grasp.

Simic's use of history as a means of explaining the past will, in his later poetry, increase. His criticism will be mostly directed towards the

horrors of war. But he will also criticise the representation of history. As in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), Simic defies the abstract rendering of a battle by just memorising the date. He will oppose the division into heroes and enemies. His interest will always be focused on the individual as in "My Widow" (CBD 26).

In *Unending Blues* (1986), in the poem "History" (UB 15), Simic writes about the fate of a family. The father is abducted and killed and the mother later loses her children.

> Do they speak in heroic couplets as he's dragged
> away looking over his shoulder?
> ...
> Then the children die of hunger, one by one.
> Of course, there are too many such cases for
> anyone to be underlining them with a red pencil.
> ...
>
> History loves to see women cry, she whispers.
> Their death makes Art, he shouts, naked.
> How pretty are the coffins and instruments of torture
> In the museum on the day of free admission to the public!

The simple man, who has no name and no face, will do without the fanfare of "heroic couplets" to bid farewell to the world. In history, ordinary people will not be named, as there is obviously a lack of space. They will serve for a weekend amusement at the "museum". Their suffering and pain can be used well as an illustration of the horrors of war. Yet they will not receive compassion and love. The museum will freeze their suffering. The coffins will look "pretty" and the instrument of torture will be used for entertainment. The individual himself, his agony and grief, will be excluded. History will focus on the pattern, on the general picture and ban detail.

In "Prodigy" (CBD 21), Simic juxtaposes chess to war and, thus shows again his predilection for the use of simple images, which, combined together, have a strange and alienating effect.

> I grew up bent over
> a chessboard.
>
> I loved the word *endgame*.
>
> All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house
near a Roman graveyard.
Planes and tanks
shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.
...

I'm told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother
Blindfolding me a lot.
...
In chess, too, the professor told me,
the masters play blindfolded,
the great ones on several boards
at the same time.

Simic puts war in relation to chess. He does not overtly compare the game to war. Only the fact that he learned to play chess during war and that he was "blindfolded" by his mother and that some chess players play blindfolded bind the two ideas together. Chess is a widely used metaphor for war to compare the cold-blooded way a general moves his armies to the detached reasoning of a chess player. Therefore, the link seems obvious. But the chess player is a precocious child. The child realises how chess and, in consequence, war is "played". The child understands the mechanism of war: the generals ignore the life in front of them. The love for the word "*endgame*" alludes to the fascination of destruction. The fact that the cousins look "worried" certainly underlines the idea that Simic alludes to destruction. In chess the word "endgame" is used for the final move of the game.

The war poetry of Simic, his preoccupation with the past and his ideas on history are also present in *Austerities* (1982). Only in his eighth book of poetry does Simic find the language to which he had aspired when he wrote *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974). Although Simic's language seems more direct, his images are still vigorous and exceptional. Simic, so it seems, writes now with more ease. The poems are smoother

and a stronger narrative element, which he initially wanted to avoid, can be detected.

In "Rosalia" (A 34-36), Simic writes the life-story of a young and forlorn woman who is obviously looking for a man.

> An especially forlorn human specimen
> Answers a marriage-ad
> On a street of compulsory misfortune,
> One drizzly November afternoon.
> Sorrow waiting with her doilies
> In a dining room with a spider-legged chandelier
> With the subway rattles from time to time.
> A cup of herb tea with a bride's eyelash
> Floating in it.
> Homemade cakes the size and color of
> A little finger caught in the door.
> There's also her grandfather's saber on the wall,
> And the story of how the Angel of Death
> Snatched her purse
> On the way home from the evening Mass.

The stylistic change is obvious. Simic is not talking in the first person nor does the poet let another person speak through his poem. The poet turns into a narrator and tells the story of a woman, who is described as lonely and who is desperately looking for a male mate. Simic writes in the present tense and thus is able to increase the tragic aspect of the woman's life. The supposed bridegroom appears in the second stanza of the poem and is described as a "lone customer waiting in the barbershop" (A 35). There is a sense of loneliness and deprivation in the poem that is underlined by the words "forlorn", "marriage-ad", "misfortune", "sorrow" and "drizzly". Although the poem tells a story, Simic, nevertheless, does not make his poetry sound prosaic. His style is terse and the words are delicately to the point. The words "misfortune", "sorrow" and "drizzly" provide the underlying poetic structure of the poem. It is solitude and the misfortune of man's life that Simic wants to depict. The story line, so it seems, is only a pretext to evoke the idea of loneliness. Simic's interest in narrative certainly is strongest in *The World Doesn't End* (1989), where, for the first time, he writes prose poems.

In his later poetry, Simic is much more inclined to use this form. While Simic, until *White* (1972), was mostly concerned about exploiting the idea of silence, after *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), he starts to examine his past. Simic's earlier poems are based more upon observation of emotional or other inner states. These poems do not

necessarily require narrative techniques. But his later poetry circles more around ideas of history. History implies subjects. Consequently, in his later poetry, characters start to appear in his work. "Rosalia" and her bridegroom, "Mr O'Reilly", are only two of them. But Simic does not let these characters speak for themselves. His poems do not read like dialogues, monologues or plays. Rather, the poet introduces a narrator who retells the story of these people. In Simic's poems the reader is usually aware of the poet's voice. Simic uses the present tense to reduce the distancing effect of the historical discourse.

Simic's interest in history prompts him to sketch a setting for his characters. In "Rosalia" (A 34-36) a "drizzly" day, a "room with a spider-legged chandelier" and the rattling of the subway provide the background of the poem. However, Simic's descriptions of the environment are reduced to a minimum. The descriptions are not only used to give the reader a point of reference in time and space but also to intensify the atmosphere of the poem. The home-made cookies, which look like "a little finger caught in the door", are not only small, they also speak of the woman's pain. And the month "November" creates an ambience of deprivation and adds to the overall impression of poverty, pain and misfortune.

Simic's growing unease about abstract notions urges him to concentrate more on detail. In "George Simic" (RPLGM 43), the poet puts his father into the context of his past and in "History" (UB 15), Simic has to refer to war to explain the characters' pain. Simic does not write about war in general terms. He focuses on a particular individual as in "My Widow" (CBD 26). As he argues in the essay "The Trouble with Poetry" (1997), "philosophers say that poets delude themselves when they dwell lovingly on particulars. The identification of what remains untouched by change has been the philosopher's task. Poetry and the novel, on the contrary, have been delighted with the ephemeral — the smell of bread" (OF 33-34). The fact that he defies the pattern, as Simic writes in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), and because he feels the urge to focus on detail, also pushes him to use the narrative form. The detail needs to be in the context of a surrounding. In the essay, "Elegy in a Spider's Web" (1993), where Simic writes about the destruction of Sarajevo and Vukovar by the Serbs in 1993, he argues that "I continued stubbornly to believe in more than one truth. Only the individual is real" (UFT 37). The individual, like the detail, needs a setting to define itself. In order to combine these ideas together Simic needs narrative devices.

However, Simic's poetry is not simply a narrative. In the essay, "The Poetry of Village Idiots" (1996), Simic tries to explain the stylistic implications of narrative in poetry.

> For me, the prose poem is a pure literary creation, the monster child of two incompatible strategies, the lyric and the narrative. On the one hand, there's the lyric's wish to make the time stop around an image, and on the other hand, one wants to tell a little story. The aim, as in a poem written in lines, is to arouse in the reader an unconquerable desire to reread what he or she has just read. In other words, it may look like prose, but it acts like a poem. (OF 47)

The prosaic and the poetic do not fit together on a superficial level. They are stylistic antagonists. Simic, nevertheless, tries to combine them. In "Rosalia" (A 34-36), Simic hopes to achieve this by rendering the poem terse and intense. The juxtaposition of words that belong to the same class is a clear strategic device of Simic's narrative poetry. The structure of the narrative, which is held together by means of causality, is thus condensed and tightened. It gives the poem its closed structure. Simic writes in "Wonderful Words, Silent Truth" (1975-1985): "Form is the visible side of content. The way in which content becomes manifest" (WWST 85). The form is only a means to make the content visible. The content and not the form is what interests Simic most. Certainly, he wishes to "tell a little story", but what he actually wants is to distil a moment in time, to put the instant, the present, into words.

Simic's poetry gains impetus from the book *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980) onwards. His interests diversify. Simic is not a poet who changes in the sense that the ideas of his early poetry disappear in his later work. Rather, Simic tries to combine all the influences to which he was prone. The idea of silence, which often appears in his early work, has not vanished. It has become an integral part of his poetic understanding of life. His approach towards the world requires silence and solitude. He still wishes to "speak as the translator of silence" (UC 77). The interest in nature is still awake in his later poetry and his curiosity about myth, folklore, riddles and jokes will be present in his later years as well. In "My Weariness of Epic Proportions" (A 50), Simic combines most of these influences.

I like it when
Achilles
Gets killed
And even his buddy Patroclus —
And that hothead Hector —
And the whole Greek and Trojan
Jeunesse dorée
Is more or less

Expertly slaughtered
So there’s finally
Peace and quiet
(The gods having momentarily
Shut up)
One can hear
A bird sing
And a daughter ask her mother
Whether she can go to the well
And of course she can
By the lovely little path
That winds through
The olive orchard

"Achilles", "Patroclus" and "Hector" are not depicted as the heroes of the battle of Troy. The poet revels in their cruel deaths, calling it jokingly "expertly slaughtered", and expresses his relief about the "gods having momentarily / Shut up". Simic uses an alienation effect and rejoices in the killing of the "*jeunesse dorée*". He uses colloquial expressions such as "buddy" and "hothead" in order to describe the heroes of the *Iliad*. He makes jokes and, thus, achieves the effect that the figures of epic proportions are reduced so that they can be laughed at. Once the golden youth stops crying, the poet can experience peace and quiet and can focus his attention on everyday and simple matters, like the girl asking her mother if she can go to the well. All of a sudden, he can again "hear a bird sing" and indulge in the beauty of that "lovely little path". Thus, silence, nature, myth and jokes are combined in Simic’s poetry.

Simic’s embracing character could be a reason why he tries to combine all the influences in his poetry. In the essay "Fearful Paradise" (1996), where Simic writes about his experience in America, he explains why he feels the need to remain open to influences:

> One of the great temptations for an immigrant is to go native the whole way, start eating canned soup, white bread, and Jell-O and hide one’s passion for sausages smothered in onions and peppers and crackling in fat. I read Emerson and Thoreau and other new England writers and loved them, but I knew my identity was different. I was already a concoction of Yugoslav, American, Jewish, Irish, and Italian ingredients – and the stew wasn’t ready yet. There were more things to add to the pot. More identities. More images to cook. (OF 53)

Simic is essentially open to absorbing new influences. He tries to mix everything together as the image of the "stew" implies. He is, in this sense, a typical phenomenon of America's melting pot. While he avoids going "native the whole way", he is still aware that his American experience is a part of his identity. However, his past experience is more complex and he wishes to take that into account as well. He constructs his own eclectic world, where all influences can live side by side, merge and combine, as in a stew. And there is a readiness to incorporate more foreign influences. The identity thus changes with every new experience, with every new contact with the world. Simic's openness towards life, his interest in what surrounds him and an obvious aversion to mere imitation are the ingredients of Simic's originality. His reluctance to adhere to a traditional way of life reflects his wish to come as near to what is around him as possible. Simic does not want to ignore that he was born in Belgrade and moved with his family to Chicago, where he encountered emigrants from other cultures. These experiences are part of his life and they are reflected in his thinking and in his poetry.

In his analysis of *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980), the critic, David Young, explains "as an artist develops and acquires increasing technical mastery, there's a danger that the means will become the end, ...When this happens, the poet becomes a parodist of his or her earlier work, and the vitality and tension begin to drain out of the poems. Simic has skirted this danger by letting recent history more and more overtly into his mythic world, cross-ventilating it".[36] Simic has become by now a master of his technique. He knows how to startle the reader and to put him in a state of shock because he is able to find ever new unconventional and fancy juxtapositions. Simic is able to avoid mere repetition or a mere playing with language as he has learned to fold his ideas and attitudes towards war into his poetry.

Simic's preoccupation with war and death renders his language more bleak. In poems such as "History" (A 13), "Crows" (A 17), "February" (A 19) or "Autumn Air" (A 44), Simic creates an atmosphere of winter and deprivation. In these poems Simic uses colour adjectives like grey and black to achieve an effect of desolation. But often Simic keeps the use of adjectives limited in order to give weight to the small number of adjectives that he uses. Compared to *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) and *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), the new poems are shorter again and Simic seems to feel comfortable with this form. The four four-line stanzas without rhyme that he frequently uses in his earlier poetry seem to suit his purposes best: to distil a moment in time. However, the pull towards a more narrative style is also detectable. Simic does not abandon his early fantastic

[36] David, Young, "*Classic Ballroom Dances*", Weigl, 66-67.

imagery for the sake of his interest in this personal past. Simic combines these two features and incorporates them in his work.

V Unending Blues

Simic incorporates Greek mythology, Serbian folk poetry, nursery rhymes and the poetry of his contemporaries like Roethke or Popa in his poetry. His attitude, as he argues in the essay "Fearful Paradise" (1996), is not to conserve the old at the cost of refusing to accept the new. Rather, Simic tries to conserve the old and remodel it with the new in an original way. His conservatism does not mean mimicking tradition blindly. This process of using tradition as a starting point, beginning from surrealism, folk poetry and nursery rhymes, gives Simic's work its unique flavour. The image of the "stew", which he uses in the essay "Fearful Paradise" (1996) to illustrate his fundamental attitude towards new ideas explains his position towards art and life in general. The image of the "stew" throws a clarifying light upon the idea that art is ultimately necessary. The stew is a simple food, cooked and consumed by the poor as well as by the rich. To compare his art with a "stew" is not only a clear indication that eclecticism is allowed. It also shows that art should be made available to all. The image of the "stew" demystifies poetry in the sense that it is not an exclusive art, which is restricted to a small circle or elite. Rather, as Simic tries to divulge and reshape all possible forms of poetry, it is meant for everyone. Folk poetry, sung by the people for the people, and the idiosyncratic musings of the surrealists are combined by Simic to a dish that can be consumed by everyone.

At the core of his poetry lies the conviction that the mute experience of man has to be translated into words. Every form of poetry, be it loaded with mythical allusions or full of surrealistic images or simple and everyday experiences, is a result of this impulse to make silence speak. In the essay "Poetry and Experience" (1997), Simic argues that in American poetry "there's a cult of experience" (OF 36). American poets, according to Simic, never get tired of telling their audience of what happened to them. "*This is what happened to me. This is what I saw and felt*" (OF 36). As the world changes, their experiences change as well. There is always something new that has to be told, although, superficially, it might look like mere repetition. The world is in constant flux. Every new idea, new word, new image changes the way we experience the world. The poet, who tries to catch these moments and translate them into his language, has to take that into account, Simic argues. "Lyric poetry at its purest is the phenomenology and metaphysics of that moment and consciousness. American poetry with its obsessive scrutiny and retelling of experience extends the ambitions of lyric poetry even farther. Everything from Whitman's endless catalogues and Dickinson's miniature inner theatre...are a part and parcel of the same project" (OF 37). Simic's idea of American poetry and his own work is the retelling of experience. The slightest change

of the perception of the world can result into a new poem. Diligently, with care and a sense of passion, the poet tries to incorporate all that crosses his way. There is a sense that Simic feels an urge, an irresistible drive, to include everything that is part of his life. There is a hunger for experience. Nothing is to be dropped or thrown away. Everything seems special, unique and interesting. His reading experience of folk ballads and surrealist poetry, his ideas on history, his painful experiences, his fear of death, the pleasure of sex, the joy of a good meal, reading books in the light of a candle and the enjoyment of listening to music are all parts of the poet's life and he wishes to capture these moments in his poetry. The moments of experience are all equally important. They are all ingredients for Simic's "stew". At the core of Simic's poetic endeavour lies the conviction that all we have is experience. And this is what Simic tries to bring into his poetry.

The poetry of other centuries or of different cultures finds its way into Simic's work. The blues, which he first heard in his native Belgrade as a ten-year-old child, constitutes a very important element of his work. In the blues Simic finds similarities to his own poetic endeavour. In "No Cure for the Blues" (1993), Simic uses an idea of Maurice Blanchot as a motto for his thoughts about blues music: "*It seems that we learn something about art when we experience what the word solitude is meant to designate*" (UFT 46). Solitude, which, for Simic, is a necessary precondition for his poetic meditation, is also something that he experiences in the blues. In this essay Simic describes how he listened to blues. "The friendship of solitude, late night, and the blues. In 1959,...I had a radio and a cheap portable record player" (UFT 49). In these moments Simic seems to be conscious of himself and his surroundings. He is alone and listens intently. This state of concentration is only a precondition. Simic finds in blues also close ties to his own poetic work, because both are anchored in a similar way of perceiving the world.

> The blues prove the complete silliness of any theory of cultural separatism which denies the possibility of aesthetic experience outside one's race, ethnicity, religion, or even gender. Like all genuine art, the blues belong to a specific time, place, and people which it then, paradoxically, transcends. The secret of its transcendence lies in its minor key and its poetry of solitude. Lyric poetry has no closer relation anywhere than the blues. The reason people make lyric poems and blues songs is because our life is short, sweet, and fleeting. The blues bears witness to the strangeness of each individual's fate. (UFT 49)

Simic does not support the idea that cultures are in any way separated from each other. Art, although located in a specific place, has the ability to

transcend itself. It is not restricted to a specific time and a particular place and it is not limited to a special public that can read and understand art. In Simic's universal sense, art has the ability to break out of the boundaries that time and place impose upon its creator. It can essentially influence everyone, as its nature is transcendental. Simic sees a correspondence between his own idea of poetry and the idea of the blues. The link is established through "solitude".

In his interview with Starbuck (1975), Simic states: "The important thing is that solitude, almost monastic solitude, and obsession. To cultivate that madness. "Madness" I throw around in a large way, but it means *your own sense* of reality, your own sense of yourself existing in this world. *Consciousness* of yourself existing in this world. That's it" (UC 45). Solitude enables the poet to receive a sense of himself "*existing*" in the world. Without it the poet is unable to listen to the world and to recognise the fact that he lives. Although it is a *fait accompli* that we exist, we are not always conscious that we exist. As Simic argues, the poet needs to make himself aware of this fact.

The French philosopher, René Descartes, argues in his book, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*, that our existence as an intellectual being is proven by the fact that we think. This knowledge proves that in order to realise that one is, one is urged to think that one thinks and, therefore, is.[37] If we simply think about something, we do not realise that we actually are intellectual beings. In order to realise that we are, we have to think that we think. We have to be conscious of the act of thinking. The act of observing a flower has to be reflected by another act that is directed upon the act of observing a flower. In order to become conscious of something one is urged to direct one's thoughts to what one is doing, thinking. Only this additional act enables us to realise that we are. If someone thinks about a flower, it implies that he exists as an intellectual being but it does not necessarily prove it. In order to prove it, one has to step back and think that one thinks about a flower. To be conscious of something means to move away from it. Thus, to be conscious of the world implies, for Simic, moving away from it and choosing solitude, "almost monastic solitude". In this atmosphere the poet is able to establish the necessary distance. Here he can think about what he thought and thus get a sense that he exists. The poet has to create his own phenomenological method in order to realise that he is. "Lyric poetry at its purest is the phenomenology and metaphysics of that moment and consciousness" (OF 37). The moment of experience has to be re-enacted in solitude in order to distil the magic and metaphysics of existence.

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[37] René, Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans., Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett, 1993, 15-35.

Blues music is also about this solitude. It is about life, which is "short, sweet, and fleeting" (UFT 49). The blues singer, in Simic's view, tries to embrace the moment as it is, unfiltered and raw. "The blues bears witness to the strangeness of each individual's fate" (UFT 49). The fact that Simic points to the "individual's fate" reinforces the ties between his lyric poetry and the blues. Simic is, as he shows in "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), more interested in the individual than in the group and he is more fascinated by experience than by theory. What Simic looks for is life as it is, in its many forms and varieties. The blues opens new possibilities to Simic and helps him to intensify his search for what is.

Simic can be called a blues aficionado. In the essay, "No Cure for the Blues" (1993), Simic explains that already in his Belgrade days he listened to "Bessie Smith, Eva Taylor, Bertha Chippie Hill, Alberta Hunter, Sippie Wallace, Ada Brown, Ida Cox, Victoria Spivey — addicts of the blues know them all" (UFT 48). Simic shows his expertise when, in the same essay, he quotes a 23 lines long hoodoo blues lyric from 1931 called "Seven Sisters" by an unknown performer. Simic loves the blues as "I feel a homesickness for a vanished world that I was never part of" (UFT 49). In blues he seems to be able to transcend his everyday perception of the world and enter into a kind of mysterious dream world. Simic, who is known for his love for blues, is also featured with his poem, "Crepuscule with Nellie" (BGD 15-16), on one of the major Web sites that are exclusively concerned with the life and the achievements of the legendary jazz musician, Thelonious Monk (http://www.achilles.net/~howardm/nellie.html). In this poem, Simic writes about his love for the mystery of blues. But rather than mimicking the cadence and sound of blues or jazz songs, Simic tries to catch the sense of the moment that blues music gives him: "All of a sudden, a clear sense / of a memorable occasion / The joy of it, the delicious melancholy..."(BGD 15-16). The rhythm of these lines does not follow the traditional blues lyric. Simic tries with his own sense of rhythm to render his experience of listening to blues. The solitude and mysteriousness that lies at the core of blues is what attracts Simic.

In the interview with Santos (1984), Simic argues that "blues taught me a number of things. How to tell a story quickly, economically. The value of gaps, ellipses, and most importantly, the virtues of simplicity and accessibility" (UC 70). Although Simic never makes use of an idiosyncratic or obscure style, it is interesting that he stresses the simplicity of blues lyrics as if to indicate that his search for stylistic refinement is always directed towards a greater economy of means. One obvious characteristic of the simplicity of blues lyrics is their "accessibility". In the same interview Simic argues that "it's fine to read the great lyric poets of the past, but one also has to know how the people in the language you're writing in sing" (UC 69). Simic wants to write in a language that reflects

his generation. While he does not just want to copy the old masters, he is prepared to learn from them and fold them into his own poetic universe. He wishes to write in the language that people use. He wants to achieve a colloquialism that still has the power of poetry.

A comparison of a blues lyric, sung by Funny Papa Smith in 1930, with Simic's poem "Without a Sough of Wind" (UB 58) best illustrates the similarities between the blues and Simic's poetry.[38]

> Against the backdrop
> Of a twilight world
> In which one has done so little
> For one's soul
>
> She hangs a skirt
> On the doorknob
> She puts a foot on the chair
> To take off a black stocking. (UB 58)
>
> Some people tell me,
> God takes care of old folks and fools,
> But since I've been born,
> He must have changed the rules. (UFT 50)

Funny Papa Smith's blues lyric is simple and straightforward and so are the opening lines of Simic's "Without a Sough of Wind". In both poems the startling effect is achieved by a simple line that stands in contrast to the preceding or following lines. While in the blues lyric the last line gives the stanza its meaning and flavour of surprise, Simic startles the reader in "Without a Sough of Wind" in the third line. Simic opens his poem by sketching a scene at sunset. But then, all of a sudden, he introduces the idea of the soul and laments that one has seemingly neglected it for too long. He continues to describe how a woman takes off her stockings. Not mentioning the concept of soul again, Simic continues to describe a scene at sunset in a small room, where a man and woman obviously prepare to make love. But the idea of the soul reverberates through the whole poem. It is as if this short reference to the soul infuses the whole scene with mystery and strangeness, as if the darkness in the room has become darker by the allusion to the apparently neglected soul. While Funny Papa Smith's lyric ends in comic relief, although sardonic, Simic's poem receives a bleaker tone with the implication of the concept of soul. The fact that Simic does not expand on the idea of the soul and only describes it in a negative tone,

[38] Simic quotes Funny Papa Smith's song in "No Cure for the Blues" (UFT 50).

"in which one has done so little / For one's soul", shows that he makes use of the "value of gaps". Simic is alluding to the concept of the soul, without going much into detail. By declining to be specific and elaborating on the consequences of his idea, Simic creates an atmosphere of secrecy and, simultaneously, heightens the tension of the poem. The poem ends without a clear indication of what the allusion to the soul could actually mean. The gap creates a feeling of unease that gives the poem its strength. The blues lyric omits the obvious fact that the singer is singing about pain and misery. Simic excludes the fact that he is writing about the fears of man. Both works follow a similar strategy as they attempt to achieve a strong effect with little means. They profit from the fact that they are simple. The idea can unfold easily and powerfully.

But there are also differences between the blues lyric and Simic's poem. While the blues poem uses rhyme (fools/rules) Simic does without. Simic makes use of assonance. The vowels "o" and "u" are to be found throughout the poem, mimicking the vowel of the pivotal word "soul". With the help of assonance Simic is able to create a heightened rhythm and Simic can stress the idea of the soul, which — although used only once — dominates the whole atmosphere of the poem.

The reason why Simic does not use the traditional blues lyric form is that it would not cope with his own rhythm. The stock blues stanza consists of three lines. The first two lines often rhyme or are identical. Sometimes the same words are used at the end of a line or the first line is repeated in the second line. This does not correspond to Simic's idea of rhythm, as it would destroy his own call and response pattern. While the blues singer repeats the first two lines, Simic's repetitions are often restricted to one word or two and he works more with variations and associations.[39] Simic works with clauses and phrases that are read faster or slower. In the first stanza of "Without a Sough of Wind" (UB 58) the rhythm accelerates until it reaches a climax in the word "soul". Then, in order to heighten the climactic effect, the rhythm becomes slower and the voice deeper. Simic's rhythm is not fastened to a fixed matrix. Rather, he tries to change the rhythm or the tonality.

Simic's poetry, through the influence of blues, changes slightly in the years between 1983 and 1990. The influence of blues lyrics and music was already perceivable in his early poems, especially eroticism and sex. In *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), Simic writes poems such as "Breasts" (RPLGM 57-59), "That Straightlaced Christian Thing Between Her Legs" (RPLGM 54-56) and "The Body" (RPLGM 51), where he describes the pleasures of sex. This interest in sensuality remains strong

[39] Marshall W., Stearns, *The Story of Jazz*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970, 104-105.

throughout his poetry, with the exception of the years during which he works on *Charon's Cosmology* (1977), *Austerities* (1982) and *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1983). Simic explains to Santos (1984) that the interest in the description of sex and eroticism cannot be solely traced back to blues. "As for eroticism, isn't it synonymous with imagination? Eros as the cause of logos, and that sort of thing. The one lying in the dark and trying to visualise the loved one is at the mercy of both" (UC 70).

Blues music and blues lyrics have, however, increased Simic's awareness of how eroticism and sex can be presented in poetry. In the essay "No Cure for the Blues" (1993), Simic explains that "the chief preoccupation of much country and urban blues is the relationship between men and women. Love, unfaithfulness, jealousy, hard times, good times, happy sex, bad sex and everything else that keeps people awake tossing and turning at night, is the subject" (UFT 47). It might be argued that Simic learned from the blues lyrics how to tackle sexuality without either sounding prudish or pornographic. As he argues in "No Cure for the Blues" (1993), "there is poetry in some of that smut" (songs with explicit sexual reference).[40]

In "Bed Music" (WBC 36), which was published in *Walking the Black Cat* (1996), Simic describes the exuberance of two lovers having sex and disturbing the neighbours.

Our love was new,
But your bedsprings were old.
In the flat below,
They stopped eating
With forks in the air.

They made the old sourpuss
Climb the stairs
And squint through the keyhole,
While we went right ahead,
Making the springs toot,

Playing "Low Down on the Bayou,"
Playing "Big Leg Mama,"
Playing "Shake it Baby"
And "Carolina Shout."

That was the limit!
They called the fire brigade.

[40] My parenthesis.

They called the Law.
They could've brought some hooch,
We told the cops.

The love making scene is comic and funny. The freshness of the love between the man and the woman is contrasted to the old bedsprings which ultimately provoke the anger of the neighbours. The "old sourpuss" tries to spy through the keyhole, but the lovers, almost in defiance of that "went right ahead", unperturbed by the forks in the flat below. The lovers are in their own world. Simic does not describe their love-making explicitly. Simic uses the titles of popular blues songs to illustrate the lovers' act. "Low down on the Bayou", a well-known song in the 1930s, which was recorded by Fletcher Henderson and his orchestra in 1931, and the titles of the other popular blues songs work as substitutes to circumscribe the sexual act by making use of the sexual connotations of words such as "leg", "shake it" or "low down".

The reference to the songs corresponds to the "music" the lovers' rhythmic motion on the bed is causing. The sound of the bedsprings is transformed into songs and, thus, given a new quality. The act of sex is not secretive or taboo. Simic, by alluding to the songs, transforms the private act of sex into something public. However, Simic leaves out any physical details. He, much more, focuses on the sensual aspect of making love that results in an exalted happiness.

The ease with which Simic tackles the idea of sex is certainly a result of his interest in blues music. The openness that the blues lyrics exhibit towards sex and eroticism, which often stands in sharp contrast with traditional forms of poetry, where sex is often only touched upon by euphemism or idiosyncratic metaphor, flows into Simic's concept of poetry. His relation to sex is not pornographic. It lacks explicit details of the sexual act, although in "That Straightlaced Christian Thing Between Her Legs" (RPLGM 54-56), Simic urges the woman to "raise your legs high / in the name of / poetry, / and let's make love / slowly / because the bed / creaks". The sexual element in Simic's poetry is usually connected to the idea of sensuality and pleasure. Sex is part of the poet's life and he wishes to express it.

Besides its style and subject matter, blues music hits another chord. In the essay, "No Cure for the Blues" (1993), Simic explains:

> The blues poet has been where we are all afraid to go, as if there was a physical place, a forbidden place that corresponds to a place in ourselves where we experience the tragic sense of life and its amazing wonders. In that dive, in that allnight blues and soul club, we feel the full weight of our fate, we taste the nothingness at the

> heart of our being, we are simultaneously wretched and happy, we spit on it all, we want to weep and raise hell, because the blues, in the end, is about a sadness older than the world, and there's no cure for that. (UFT 52)

The blues singer gives us access to the paradox of life "where we experience" both "the tragic sense of life and its amazing wonders". *Unending Blues* (1986), Simic's eleventh book of poetry, and *The World Doesn't End* (1989), his twelfth book, span the wide area of "the forbidden place", where he wants the reader to "feel the full weight of our fate".[41] Both books cover a vast area of ideas, including the relation between man and woman, as for example in "William and Cynthia" (UB 10), or in the prose poem "The fat man..." (WDE 61). Simic returns as well to Greek mythology in "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8) or in "Ambiguity created by..." (WDE 57). History is also described in "History" (UB 15) and in "History Lesson" (WDE 21) and the fate of the social outcast and the painful experience of poverty are discussed in "Avenue of the Americas" (UB 14) or "We were so poor...". The idea of war reappears in "I am the last..." (WDE 9), "He held the Beast..." (WDE 11), "In the fourth year..." (WDE 14) or in "For the Lovers of the Absolute" (UB 16).

The various ideas with which Simic played in his earlier poetry can be linked to his fascination for experience in general. Simic argues in the essay "Poetry and Experience" (1997) that in American poetry "there's a cult of experience" (OF 36). And Simic participates in that cult. Every particle of life seems to be important. The slightest change in the weather provokes a new idea, a new poem. This is why Simic's poetry does not restrict itself to a limited set of topics and ideas. The openness of his poetry is the result of this cultural fetish for concrete detail. He defies theories that put ideas into a fixed order. He wants to remain open in order to see what is.

Fixed thoughts and the belief in unchangeable truths would restrict his view of the world. In "The Quality of Light" (UB 36), Simic focuses on the narrowing effect of theories in general.

> You worship a few oblique truths,
> You remind yourself on a morning
> So clear you do not recognize the day
> You're in a circle of things you call your own.
>
> They measure you, themselves a bit too inanimate

[41] In *The World Doesn't End* most poems have no titles. Instead, the beginning of the first line of a poem is used as a reference.

To be real. And this harsh light,
One could speak of it as a precise instrument.
Better not to ask whose it is.

You understand, you tell yourself, the rituals.
That’s why you put on the black overcoat,
And open a black umbrella inside the house,
And sit at this unsteady, round table,

For the usual breakfast of mushrooms,
Which they say got so black and poisonous-looking
While you slept naked in the arms of
Some much-aged, big-assed Ariadne.

The worship of "oblique truths" results in blindness as the first stanza implies. The man is unable to "recognize the day" as he reminds himself that he believes in his "truths". The man experiences the world as a "circle", as a closed space, where he understands the things. However the objects that he measures with his mind start to define and confine him in turn. "They measure you", Simic writes, and he continues to describe the world as "a bit too inanimate / To be real". To perceive the world from a fixed perspective ultimately means, as the first two lines of the second stanza imply, that things become dead, "inanimate". The things, which the man "calls his own", encapsulate him and bar his access to reality. The "circle", which is both a symbol of security and captivity, makes his life look like that of a prisoner. Although the "oblique truths" might give the man a certain kind of security and the sense that he understands the world, there is still the feeling that his theory does not allow him to see the world as it is. The morning light is "harsh", like an instrument that is able to divide the world into segments and parts. In these circumstances it is better not to ponder on origins and ask who has created the light. The question might raise doubts and result in the destruction of the circle, within which the man feels secure.

It is interesting that Simic does not give us any details of the outside world. And Simic’s description of the man is reduced to how he puts on his black coat and how he opens an umbrella "inside the house". To exclude the outside world and to focus on the inside of the house intensifies the idea that the man lives in confinement. The light, which would enable him to see, is described as "harsh", unpleasant, so as to indicate that the outside world makes him shiver. He sticks to his stabilising "rituals" but the "unsteady" table speaks of a nagging sense of doubt and points to the impossibility that living in self-defined solitary confinement may provide an ultimate sense of stability.

The last stanza with its images of "mushrooms" and "poison" tells of the fatality of such a situation. The idea of confinement reappears in the allusion to the Greek mythological figure Ariadne. Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos, is linked in Greek mythology to idea of the labyrinth. It was she who provided Theseus with the necessary thread that helped him to leave the labyrinth her father had constructed. Ariadne can be related to the wish to find a way out of confinement into liberty. As her thread helped Theseus to escape the Minotaur, the man with a bull's head who was fed with human flesh, Simic's Ariadne can also be seen as a symbol of freedom. The fact that Simic mentions Ariadne in the last line shows that the man is imprisoned and that the woman might help him out of the labyrinth that he himself has contrived. The theories, the preconditioned thoughts, bind him to the inside of his house. His way out into the world, his need to escape, can only be provided by the "much-aged, big-assed" Ariadne. The quality of light, its harshness and cruelty, can be softened by the mellow nature of Ariadne. The quality of light can, with the help of Ariadne's thread, be changed into a means to see.

In the "Quality of Light" (UB 36), Simic works with echoes, variations and associations. The idea of "worship" that is hinted at in the first line is echoed by the allusion to Ariadne in the last line of the poem, giving the poem a circular structure. Simic also works with variations of the same idea as the words "circle" and "round table" indicate. Opposition, as indicted by "light" and "black", "naked" and "overcoat", "rituals", which evoke the idea of regularity, and "unsteady", is also used in the sixteen-line poem. The lines are short, usually they consist of eight to ten syllables. Only in this rather short form, so it seems, is Simic able to compose a consistent and tight-structured poem.

In *The World Doesn't End* (1989), Simic refers to theory in "O the great God..."(WDE 64). In this prose poem Simic argues that the "great God of Theory" is just "a pencil stub" with a worn eraser "at the end of a huge scribble". Theories are only ideas written down on a piece of paper. They are compared to a "huge scribble", a chaos, that might ultimately lead to a senseless and restricting order. And order, as Simic indicates in "The Quality of Light" (UB 36), has, paradoxically, a destroying capacity. It destroys man's ability to see the world as it is. It makes man the prisoner of himself. Simic opposes this idea. The motto of the volume *The World Doesn't End* (1989), a quote from the American jazz musician Fats Waller, is "*Let's Waltz the Rumba*". This sentence clearly indicates that Simic wants to mix ideas, that he wishes to combine styles and theories in order to achieve something new. He proposes chaos and paradox for the sake of freedom. As the title of the volume indicates, the world has no end, it is open, free. We can waltz the rumba, walk on the ceiling or talk with dogs.

Everything is possible and must be possible because man is essentially free and has to be so.

In *Unending Blues* (1986) as well as in *The World Doesn't End* (1989), Simic's wonder about the variety of the world, his love of the moment of experience and his wish to describe that moment are strong. In "December" (UB 3), Simic describes one of these moments.

It snows
and still the derelicts
go
carrying sandwich boards —

one proclaiming
the end of the world
the other
the rates of the local barbershop

The two figures in the winter city landscape look lost and crazy as the word "derelicts" implies. The bad weather intensifies the poverty of the two men. They are a part of the world, a part of the city's life. They spread the news. While one proclaims doomsday the other informs the people about prices of the local barbershop. The scene, unimportant and uninteresting as it may seem, shows, nevertheless, a face, one of many, of the city, of winter, of man. The prices of the local barber shop and the proclamation of doomsday, two ideas that obviously have nothing in common, are combined in time and place. The paradox of city life, the paradox and variety of life in general, is emphasised with these two proclamations.

Simic, as a real observer, does not comment on the scene. He simply describes it and wonders at its impact. Neither is one of the derelicts being called crazy because of his doomsday prediction, nor the other being judged more down to earth because he is proclaiming prices. Both are just two figures that pass through the streets, giving, for a moment, another view of the street, of the city. The style of "December" (UB 3) shows that Simic is a master of the short poem. With the juxtaposition of two disparate things he can create a dazzling effect. With the help of omission Simic is able to achieve a strong impact with little means. The word "derelicts" is enough to create an atmosphere of poverty and abandonment.

An important part of experience, and this is stressed in Simic's view on blues, is sadness and tragedy. "The blues, in the end, is about a sadness older than the world, and there's no cure for that" (UFT 52), Simic explains in "No Cure for the Blues"(1993). Simic's poetry, although often filled with idiosyncratic images and poems that focus on pleasure and sensuality, is, due to his interest in the past, history and war, also partially bleak and

pessimistic. The range of Simic's poetry becomes wider in *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), where he starts slowly to move away from his meta-musings about poetry and gradually discovers his own past. Both painful and pleasurable experiences are to be found in his poetry from 1974 onwards. Tragedy and comedy are both prominent, although between *Charon's Cosmology* and *Austerities*, from 1977 to 1982, Simic's mind seems to be more preoccupied with the tragic experiences of life, as he often returns to the ideas of war, history and social inequality. The sense of tragedy grows in his later work, but it does not become predominant. Simic writes in "No Cure for the Blues" (1993) that the blues singer gives us access to the paradox of life, "where we experience" both "the tragic sense of life and its amazing wonders" (UFT 52).

In *Unending Blues* (1986), Simic is often concerned with the plight of the so-called small man, the individual who is excluded from the consciousness of mankind, the pawn of history. These outcasts also experience tragic moments. Yet tragedy is a term that, in literature, is often associated with kings or other members of the high class, human beings of title, power and position. Aristotle argues in his *Poetics* that in order to heighten the quality of tragedy, the writer should make use of noble figures.[42] This, especially for a contemporary writer who seldom refers to kings or queens, poses a problem. How can the dignity, which is associated with the noble class, be brought to the proletarians? Simic answers these questions in his poem "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8).

> The weight of tragic events
> On everyone's back,
> Just as tragedy
> In the proper Greek sense
> Was thought impossible
> To compose in our day.
>
> There were scaffolds,
> Makeshift stages,
> Puny figures on them,
> Like small indistinct animals
> Caught in the headlights
> Crossing the road way ahead,
>
> In the gray twilight
> That went on hesitating

[42] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans., Richard Janko, Indianapolis, IN, Hackett, 1987, 50-55.

On the verge of a huge
Starless autumn night.
One could’ve been in
The back of an open truck
Hunkering because of
The speed and chill.

One could’ve been walking
With a sidelong glance
At the many troubling shapes
The bare trees made —
Like those about to shriek,
But finding themselves unable
To utter a word now.

One could have been in
One of these dying mill towns
Inside a small dim grocery
When the news broke.
One would’ve drawn near the radio
With the one many months pregnant
Who serves there at that hour

Simic opens the poem by referring to the alleged impossibility of giving tragedy, "in the proper Greek sense", a modern literary form. Although modern man is not spared from experiencing tragic events, literature, so it seems, is unable to express these events in an appropriate form. The Greeks were able to compose tragedy, Simic writes. In the second stanza, Simic refers to the theatre. But it is unclear, although he uses the past form "were", if he is referring to the Greeks or to modern drama, which allegedly fails to create the proper atmosphere for tragedy. There were "puny" figures on the "scaffolds". Certainly, one is inclined to think of an Elizabethan stage. But the comparison of the "puny figures" to a small animal caught in the headlight of a car might be an indication that Simic has a modern tragedy in mind as cars are modern inventions. The reference to the "puny figures" stands in contrast to Aristotle’s argument, which says that in order to highlight the tragic dimension of an event, noble, that is important, figures should appear on stage. The event of an animal being hit by a car might be called tragic, yet it is no tragedy according to Aristotle’s definition. The fact of death alone is not enough to speak of tragedy.

Simic writes of tragedy that it "was thought" impossible to compose in our day. Consequently, Simic writes his own, modern idea of tragedy.

The hesitating twilight, the moment between absolute states, day and night, provides the background, the "scaffold", for his tragedy. Simic is not following Aristotle's device of the unity of time, place and action. In the third, fourth and fifth stanzas he lists probabilities as the verb "could've" implies. There is no tragic action, no specific time and the place seems to be unimportant too: "One could've been walking", "One could've been in / The back of an open truck", "One could've been in / One of these dying mill towns". Tragedy can strike one at any moment and at any place, irrespective of what one is doing, Simic seems to imply. When the "news" breaks, one is unprepared. It is not the traditional messenger that breaks the news. An ordinary radio serves as a harbinger.

Was there a smell of
Spilled blood in the air,
Or was it that other,
Much finer scent — of fear,
The fear of approaching death
One met on the empty street?

Monsters on movie posters, too,
Prominently displayed.
Then, six factory girls,
Arm in arm, laughing
As if they've been drinking.
At the very least, one
Could've been one of them.

The one with a mouth
Painted bright red,
Who feels out of sorts,
For no reason, very pale,
And so, excusing herself,
Vanishes where it says:
Rooms for Rent,
And immediately goes to bed,
Fully dressed, only

To lie with eyes open,
Trembling, despite the covers.
It's just a bad chill,
She keeps telling herself
Not having seen the papers
Which the landlord has the dog

Bring from the front porch.

The old man never learned
To read well, and so
Reads on in the half-whisper,
And in that half-light
Verging on the dark,
About that day's tragedies
Which supposedly are not
Tragedies in the absence of
Figures endowed with
Classic nobility of soul.

Simic locates the scene in a "dying mill town" in order to create an atmosphere of poverty and neglect. The place is peripheral, far away from the centre, the power and the nobility. Simic breaks Aristotle's rules to prove that tragedy does not have to be restricted as far as its form is concerned. There is another interesting breach of the rules. Simic does not create a tragedy by depicting an event. There is no "blood" but the "much finer scent – of fear". Simic creates tension but he does not clear the air. As indicated in the third stanza, the background that Simic provides is "twilight". In this state darkness and light are intermingled. It is a moment of suspension. The equivalent human emotion is fear, which lies between ignorance of the tragic act and the act itself. The twilight is the moment before darkness; fear is the state before the tragic act itself.

In the seventh stanza, Simic even makes use of trivial images as the movie poster of the "monsters" implies. The monsters, which are associated with horror movies and, therefore, belong to the so-called trivial movie genre, are used by Simic as a premonition of a tragic event. Once again he breaks the rules of the traditional form of tragedy. The six factory girls increase the atmosphere of poverty and strengthen the idea of periphery. The girls belong to the lower social class, their work is negligible, they are almost outcasts, lost figures in a "dying mill town". As Simic continues, one of these girls might be gripped by fear. It is interesting that Simic, in the eighth stanza, changes the mode of the verb form. While in the beginning of the poem Simic uses the conditional form, he switches to the present. The girl suddenly "feels" uncomfortable and "vanishes" and "goes" to bed. The switch from the conditional to the present helps Simic to heighten the dramatic moment of fear.

In the last stanza, the old man, who is hardly able to read, informs himself through the newspapers about the "day's tragedies". Simic writes that these are not tragedies, as the figures "supposedly" lack the "classic nobility of soul". This last statement can be read as an ironic comment on

the preceding lines. The factory girls, the dying mill town, the horror movie pictures are all ingredients that are not part of traditional tragedy as they lack the necessary social status. But Simic, focusing on the trembling girl, wants to focus on how tragedy is being experienced. Simic wishes to show that tragedy does not depend on the outer form. Much more, it is the feeling that is important. The classic nobility of soul is not something that necessarily implies an outward glamour. In order to illustrate tragedy, simple people in a simple surrounding suffice. What is important is how they experience the event.

In "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8), Simic shows his interest in the individual who is stripped of certain privileges and importance. He wants to stress the equality of all human beings. While in the poem "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), Simic calls himself initially "the idiot pupil / of a practical joker", from *Unending Blues* (1986) onwards, he almost feverishly wants to give a voice to the unprivileged classes.

"Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8) is one of the longest poems in Simic's work. It consists of ten sections. Each section is between six to ten lines long. The lines themselves are usually short, varying between five to ten syllables. Most sections either end with a full stop or a comma. The poem opens with the thesis that tragedy is thought impossible to compose in our day and the following sections then prove the opposite. While in the first section Simic remains in the realm of the abstract, in the rest of the poem he tries to be as concrete as possible, construing various scenarios and details. The last nine sections proceed like a story and are always to be read against the context of the first section. The sections, in themselves, are not small poems. The sections work only in connection with each other and they have to be read in sequence. Though the position of the fifth section ("Was there a smell of") could probably be moved within the poem, it's position is still important for the atmosphere as it paves the way to the tragic event by evoking the word "blood".

On the whole, the poem reads like a story, though, with its slow and melancholic rhythmical pattern the poem also shows Simic's awareness of prosody. To heighten the melancholic effect, Simic makes use of a rhythmical pattern that forces the reader to read the sentences and phrases in waves of rising and falling cadences. Although the lines are short, they are often either syntactically or semantically connected to the next line. With the help of caesura, Simic creates a pause in the middle of the line and thus stretches the rhythm. The language is simple and Simic shows his predilection for the everyday world with his allusions to "a dying mill" town, "radio", "movie posters", "factory girls" and "rooms for Rent". The "totally fucked up world of super highways, slums, subways, and the poor bastards who have to work every day in that world" (UC 49-50) is also present in "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8).

In "Avenue of the Americas" (UB 14), he observes how a poor young man earns his living on the street and, simultaneously, Simic uses the scene as a pretext to criticise the state of society, which allows poverty to be displayed in such a prominent place.

> A cat and a mouse were lapping milk
> From the same saucer
> For the benefit of the lunch-hour crowd.
>
> The owner of the pair
> Had a tucked sleeve in place of a right arm
> And no teeth despite his youth.
>
> He kept smiling and bowing deeply
> In the manner of a servant
> Of a haughty and severe master.

The man is a poor invalid who depends on the public's donations. He provokes the people's pity and compassion by performing an almost surreal act. On the "Avenue of the Americas" a man is stripped of his dignity and has to perform a spectacle in order to satisfy the public. It is obvious that Simic pities the man without an arm. However, he does not tell the reader why the man is a cripple. One can only assume that he has lost his arm during a war or in an accident and that this, probably, forces him to live as a beggar. The title, which is a reference both to New York and the United States, shows that Simic's critique is directed against the social inequality within the country. Without the cat and the mouse, which are drinking from the same bowl, the people would obviously walk by and ignore the man. The fact that he has only one arm and no teeth would not be sufficient to arouse the interest or the pity of the public. Only by targeting the need for excitement of the bored lunch-hour crowd, is the man able to earn his living. Without it, the poem implies, he would be neglected by society, because the fact that he is an invalid is not enough to trigger pity and compassion.

Unending Blues (1986) is one of Simic's most intense books because of the poet's political commitment, reflected in the fervent tone of poems such as "History" (UB 15) or "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8). While I would not argue that Simic's earlier volumes are less interesting, *Unending Blues* (1986) is, nevertheless, outstanding because Simic's inward musings are no longer exclusively centred around objects but also around highly emotional issues such as poverty, war and death. His ideas are not stated in an abstract and general way. Rather, Simic gives us individual examples of people who are suffering from poverty. Or he retells us how he gained insight into the

mechanism of history and throws shocking details at us that are hard to digest: " How pretty are the coffins and instruments of torture / In the museum on the day of free admission to the public!" In addition, the volume excels because of some successful poems that show Simic to be an attentive observer. In "Wherein Obscurely" (UB 24) or "In the Alley" (UB 28), Simic is a spectator of a street scene. The poems flow quietly and are simple to understand. These poems build a harmonious counter-point to the history- and memory-laden poems in the book. In *Unending Blues* (1986), there are also two love poems to his wife Helen. Both poems are reminiscent of or even an answer to William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just to Say".[43] In "Dear Helen" (UB 37), the poet ponders a sea cucumber. He admits that he does not know this vegetable but he immediately starts to revel about the possibilities of its "cold and salty" associations.

I would have to dive for it, though,
Deep into the treacherous depths
While you mince the garlic
And sip the white wine
Into which the night is falling.
I should be back soon
With those lovely green vegetables
Out of the shark-infested sea.

The poem is an answer to Williams' naked and direct excuse that he has eaten the plumes. Simic, in contrast to Williams, makes up his own story and wishes to dive for this vegetable to eat it with his love. It is a very personal answer of Simic to Williams' style and, in addition, it is a beautiful poem that speaks of the love he feels for his wife. Unfortunately, Simic has not written more of these quiet and gently flowing poems.

Simic's relation to God and religion changes with Simic's growing unease about the state of society. While his early poems seem to suggest that he believes in God or in a creator, Simic's faith seems to weaken and ultimately to vanish in his later years. In his first book of poetry, *What the Grass Says* (1967), Simic makes a clear reference to God in "Sparrow" (WGS 25). The weak sparrow in the hands of the poet is compared to the way God holds human life in his hands. And in the interview in *Crazy Horse* (1972), Simic says that he does not "mind admitting that I believe in God" (UC 6). Simic's concept of God starts crumbling with the exploration of his personal past. With the emergence of the war poetry, from *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), where he develops his own understanding of history and concentrates on issues such as poverty or

[43] William Carlos, Williams, "Selected Poems", London, Penguin, 1976, 72.

death, Simic steadily questions his relation to God and the meaning of life in general. In "Sparrow" (WGS 25), Simic gives the reader a simple and consoling view of life. In *Austerities* (1982), published in 1982, fifteen years after the publication of *What the Grass Says* (1967), Simic writes in the poem, "Spoons with Realistic Dead Flies on Them" (A 14) that he is not a believer.

> I cause many worries to my mother.
> My body will run with the weeds some day.
> My head will have its slaughterhouse-ants,
> Its carnivorous, bloody-aproned ants.
>
> That was not in your legends, saints!
> How she worked as a saleslady in a novelty store:
> Joy buzzers and false beards
> Between her and immortal life.
>
> A room she rented from a minor demon.
> Dog star and coffee mill for company.
> A hand-operated one for each of her guardian angels
> To take a turn grinding —
>
> Though I'm not a believer —
> Neither is she, and that's why she worries,
> Looks both ways at the crossing
> At two gusts of nothing and nothing.

The hardship of life, the pain the mother has to endure due to her son and because of the job she has to take to earn her living, leads Simic to question the existence of God. The lives of the saints, obviously, are not filled with anecdotes of how they had to work in a shop or how they had to rent a room. As the lives of the saints obviously lack such profane anecdotes, they cannot provide consolation. The mother is left with a feeling of forlornness. She "worries" as both ways "at the crossing" provide "nothing". The "saints", the "angels" and the "demon" are all reduced to metaphors, apparitions of the mind. They are not the names of real entities. The only real things are, as the title ironically indicates, the spoons from the novelty store with their fake dead flies.

In "Spoons with Realistic Dead Flies on Them" (A 14), Simic again makes use of the sixteen-line short form. Each stanza consists of four lines and the lines are again not longer than ten syllables. The structure of the poem illustrates the confrontation that the poet wishes to evoke. In the first stanza words such as "weeds", "slaughterhouse" and "ants" are contrasted

to "legends", "saints" and "immortal life". In the third stanza the ideas of "demon" and "guardian angels" are juxtaposed. For the sake of brevity Simic uses the adjective "bloody-aproned" in the first stanza in order to create a shocking and strong effect, while in the second stanza the allusion to "saints" suffices. The word "saints" evokes enough associations and so the poet does not need to strengthen his argument with the help of adjectives. Usually Simic shows a restricted use of adjectives as in "Spoons with Realistic Dead Flies on Them" (A 14). The "slaughterhouse-ants" already give an idea of how Simic sees himself in the grave. The use of this adjective form helps Simic to keep his lines short and it enables him to create a disgusting effect that stands in sharp opposition to the following stanza, where the "immortal life" dominates the atmosphere.

The trouble of life, the inexplicable twists of fortune and the insanity of history turn Simic away from his belief in God. In his tenth book of poetry, *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1983), where he has compiled the poetry from the years 1967 to 1982, there are a number of poems that show Simic's growing disappointment with religion and God. In this volume, one can see what Simic has in mind when he writes in the essay "No Cure for the Blues" (1993) about "the nothingness at the heart of our being". In *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1983), this nothingness is often symbolically referred to winter or cold. Many poems such as "The Cold" (WFUV 8), "Winter Night" (WFUV 9), "Northern Exposure" (WFUV 12) and "Cold Blue Tinge" (WFUV 13), show Simic's analysis of this forlornness. The wintry landscape, its nakedness, is a symbol of our own desolation in an increasingly unfamiliar world. In "Winter Night" (WFUV 9), Simic compares the church to an iceberg.

> The church is an iceberg.
>
> It's the wind. It must be gusting tonight
> Out of those galactic orchards,
> Copernican pits and stones.
>
> The monster created by mad Dr. Frankenstein
> Sailed for the New World
> And ended up some place like New Hampshire.
>
> Actually, it's just a local drunk,
> Knocking with a snow-shovel,
> Wanting to go in and sit.
>
> An iceberg is a large, drifting
> Piece of ice, broken off a glacier.

The church, which is compared to an iceberg that is broken off a glacier, has, in Simic's view, lost contact with its origin. The iceberg floats in the sea, split from the glacier. The church, therefore, is seen by Simic as irrevocably lost. The contact to God is broken. The fact that Simic is comparing an iceberg to the church indicates that religion, God, cannot offer salvation. An iceberg is a cold and a hostile place. It is a slowly melting island that lacks an anchorage. It cannot offer the warmth and nutrition we need. The wind adds to the hostile environment. It is gusting out of the "galactic orchards". The reference to the astronomer Copernicus, who proved that the world was not the centre of the universe and provoked a radical change of man's self-perception, speaks of Simic's inability to reconcile the findings of science with the idea of God. The universe is a naked place devoid of meaning. The Copernican view of the universe leaves little room for God. Nothing in Copernicus' materialistic view provides religious consolation. The earth moves around a sun, and there are billions of suns in the universe. With Copernicus' discovery of the heliocentric system man has gained an improved understanding of the laws of the universe, but he has simultaneously lost his conviction of his special status in the universe. Man is marginalised and alone. The allusion to Frankenstein's monster adds to the mood of deprivation and forlornness. The monster, created to prove man's ability to copy God's creation, is thought to appear. The monster that in Mary Shelley's novel criticises its imperfection also looks for consolation. But Frankenstein's creation turns out to be "a local drunk" who wants to enter the church. The man and Frankenstein's monster are both seeking for protection from the "galactic orchard", from the hostility and coldness of a world that cannot provide them with appeasing solutions.

In "Winter Night" (WFUV 9), Simic opens the poem with a strange definition of the church and ends it with a description of an iceberg. The poem reads almost like a philosophical argument, a proof that the church is not able to provide help. The poem evokes the attempts of medieval philosophers to prove the existence of God. In the poem, with the reference to Copernicus, Simic also refers to science. Science is ridiculed later by the allusion to Frankenstein. In "Winter Night" (WFUV 9), Simic creates a tension between science and religion. The paradoxical allusion to Copernicus and Frankenstein and the two opposing definitions emphasise this idea.

In "Cold Blue Tinge" (WFUV 13), Simic tackles the problem of belief in God from a different angle. While in "Winter Night" (WFUV 9), his criticism is of a more intellectual nature, as the allusion to Frankenstein and Copernicus indicates, in "Cold Blue Tinge" (WFUV 13), he once again focuses on the tragedy of life of the simple man.

The pink-cheeked Jesus
Thumb-tacked above
The cold gas stove,
And the kid sitting on the pisspot,
Blowing soap-bubbles
For the black kitten.

Very peaceful, except
There's a faint moan
From the next room.
His mother's asking
For her medicine.
There is no reply.
The bubbles make no noise,
And the kitten's sleepy.

All his brothers and sisters
Have been drowned.
He'll have a long life, though,
Catching mice from the baker,
And the undertaker.

Jesus is literally overlooking the scene. He hangs, pink-cheeked — contrasted to the poverty of the family — above the gas stove that remains cold. Jesus stands, thus, in sharp opposition to the coldness that reigns in the room. The mother in the next room moans. Though Simic tells us the future story of the kitten, he could tell us a similar story about the young kid. The phonetic similarity of the words "kid" and "kitten" strengthen this idea. Simic's reference to Jesus, who is overseeing the scene, suggests that the saviour is neither able to change the fate of the kid nor the kitten. The cold that dominates the room is a metaphor for the inability to change things. Simic does not directly criticise God or Jesus. However, by putting Jesus into the context of the sick mother and the kitten, Simic is able to work with understatement and allusion.

In the prose poem "Once I knew…" (WDE 46), Simic shows that "nothing explains the world and the people in it" (OF 19). But in this poem Simic also describes how he lost his belief in a higher system of values.

Once I knew, then I forgot. It was as if I had
fallen asleep in a field only to discover at waking
that a grove of trees had grown up around me.
"Doubt nothing, believe everything", was my

friend’s idea of metaphysics, although his brother
ran away with his wife. He still bought her a rose
every day, sat in the empty house for the next
twenty years talking to her about the weather.
I was already dozing off in the shade, dreaming
that the rustling trees were my many selves explain-
ing themselves all at the same time so that I could
not make out a single word. My life was a beautiful
mystery on the verge of understanding, always on
the verge! Think of it!
My friend’s empty house with every one
of its windows lit. The dark trees multiplying all
around it.

Simic says that he "knew" once. Probably he is referring cryptically to the time when he believed in God. But it is not clear. It might mean that he once was convinced of what he thought. This time is lost. Between the old state of knowing and the new state of doubt lies sleep, probably a dream. It seems that the previous period of conviction is now perceived as a distant dream. The trees, which encircle the poet, are a sign of the growing ignorance that has befallen him during sleep. The image of the wood is often used in fairy tales to refer to ignorance.

Simic ridicules his friend’s decision to believe everything and ignore doubts. He makes fun of his friend’s belief. Simic's friend was betrayed by his brother and wife. Still, the friend goes on living as if nothing has happened. He turns a blind eye to reality and stubbornly sticks to his rules. The fact that his theory has not worked out successfully does not seem to bother him. Simic’s description of his friend, how he continues sending flowers to his wife and talks to her although she left him twenty years ago, is clearly the description of a blind believer, a man who refuses to accept the world as it is.

But the poet, who is full of doubts, lives a happy life. "My life was beautiful". Although he does not know and seems somehow disturbed about his many selves who do not seem to interact meaningfully, he rejoices in life. The allusion to the many selves, to his changing self, is a clear indication that Simic does not believe in fixed rules or theories. His many selves who try to explain themselves to each other fail in their endeavour to do so. Their effort results in an unresolved mystery. Simic prefers this mystery to the state of knowing, which may lead to craziness and to an incapacity to appreciate what is. The poem shows Simic’s open attitude towards life. Ideas and preconceived theories are monsters of the mind that restrict our capacity to experience the world as it is.

The prose poem form fits Simic's needs. Simic can work with associations, repetition and echo, but he is able to construct his poems much more like short stories, or, as in this case, a letter or a diary. Most of his longer poems, which often proceed like stories or diary entries, are of this quality. In *The World Doesn't End* (1989), Simic makes a virtue out of necessity as even his earlier poems, as he tells Starbuck (1975), are "coming out too much like stories" (UC 34). With this form Simic is able to create sufficient atmosphere and can give his poems a direction in time. Though Simic often wishes to capture an instant, an idea, he often has to recur to a surrounding, a scene. The prose poem form is certainly suitable for such a procedure.

Simic writes in the same essay: "In my own case, the so-called prose poems I wrote were the results of my attempt to get away from myself. To be free of my own imagination and my own brain, to embark on an adventure of unforeseeable consequences, continues to be my great dream" (OF 46). Simic seems to feel constrained by the poetic from that he himself perfected up to 1990. Thirty years after starting his career as a poet and after having mainly used short lyric forms, Simic feels the need to change. The "attempt to get away from myself" speaks of a necessity to transcend his established poetical realm. The use of the prose poem form, Simic argues, is a means to achieve this goal. Considering his argument that "form is the visible side of content" (WWST 85) and that, consequently, form influences content, it is obvious that Simic hopes that by using a different framework he will detect a new side of himself. The poems in *The World Doesn't End* (1989), nevertheless, are not fundamentally different from his earlier work. The major characteristics of the style of his earlier poems reappear in this volume. The fancy and fantastic use of language as in "She's pressing me gently with a hot steam iron, or she slips her hand inside me as if I were a sock that needed mending" (WDE 7) are reminiscent of his earlier poetry.

The prose poem form allows Simic, as he writes in the essay "Poetry for Village Idiots" (1996), to "tell a little story". The prose poem form enables him to apply a looser structure. The exclusion of line breaks certainly gives the poems in this book a greater fluidity and a more diversified rhythmical pattern. Compared to the short poems such as "December" (UB 3) or "William and Cynthia" (UB 10), where Simic focuses on a particular idea, the poems in this volume read often like anecdotes as in "The clouds told him..." (WDE 35) or "An actor pretending..." (WDE 37). In these poems Simic paints a little scene and adds a little dialogue as in "Everybody knows the..." (WDE 10), where Simic tells the story of his grandfather meeting Freud. The new poems are strange and often even nonsensical as in "Are Russian cannibals worse than the English?" (WDE 36). Despite Simic's wish to enter a new poetic realm

by using a different poetical form his poetry does not change dramatically. Simic remains recognisable as his stylistic hallmarks such as jokes or riddles reappear.

> Everything's foreseeable. Everything has already
> been foreseen. What has been fated cannot be
> avoided. Even this boiled potato. This fork. This
> chunk of dark bread. This thought too....
> My grandmother sweeping the sidewalk knows
> that. She says there's no god, only an eye here and
> there that sees clearly. The neighbors are too busy
> watching TV to burn her as a witch. (WDE 27)

This poem reminds the reader of "Spoons with Realistic Flies on Them" (A 14). But the difference between this poem and the one in *Austerities* (1982) is that in the prose poem "Everything's foreseeable" (WDE 27) Simic jumps around more wildly. While Simic usually tries to remain within a specific semantic realm, echoing and repeating words that belong to the same class, the prose poem allows him to move around freely. The first three sentences in the prose poem read like a thesis. The next four lines give a specific example. The gap between these two parts has to be filled by the reader's interpretation. How are fate and the potato to be related? In the eighth sentence Simic throws in the image of the grandmother and in the last sentence, television, neighbours and the practice of witch-burning are brought into relation with each other. Simic simply touches on the various topics and lets them work for themselves. The poet does not establish a link between the four parts of the poem. The connection has to be established by the reader himself. The story remains enigmatic due to the semantic leaps.

The critic, Christopher Buckley, observes in an essay on this book that Simic "leaves us at most crucial moments. At the end of his great poems we are always alone, their fateful acts and consequences now ours to consider".[44] In the prose poem form, Simic gives the reader fewer clues as to how to combine and interpret the lines. His poems in the book *The World Doesn't End* (1989) are, consequently, stranger and more difficult to understand. The technique of making bigger imaginative leaps and simultaneously neglecting the compressed order of the lyric poem gives Simic, without doubt, new possibilities. However, most poems in this volume do not differ much from his earlier poetry. "To free myself of my own imagination...continues to be my great dream".

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[44] Weigl, 111.

While Simic loses his religious faith, his fascination for the mysterious is as alive as ever. In the essay "Charles the Obscure" (1994), Simic argues that "I love metaphysics and its speculations, but the suspicion at the core of my being is that we are whistling in the dark. Still, I have tears in my eyes every time I hear good church music" (OF 18). The music might, for a limited period of time, provide the consolation that he is looking for. It might give comfort, as long as it lasts, but the doubts still linger at the core of Simic's heart. While his intellect leads him to the conviction that there is no God, he is still fascinated by the thoughts and writings of the mystics. This interest can be explained by Simic's hunger for experience. There is almost nothing that he would not read or think about. Simic is a sceptic with a devouring lust for the mystics.

In the "Writings of the Mystics" (WFUV 13-14) and "Le Beau Monde" (BGD 19), Simic writes about the excitement of the unknown.

> A man got up to talk about Marcel Proust,
> "The great French writer,"
> From a soapbox famous for its speeches
> About crooked bosses and the working poor.
>
> I swear it (Tony Russo is my witness).
> It was late one night, the crowd was thinning,
> But then they all came back
> To see what his mumbling was all about.
>
> He looked like a dishwasher
> From one of the dives on Avenue B.
> He chewed his nails as he spoke
> He said this and that in what must've been French.
>
> Everybody perked up, even the winos.
> The tough guys stopped flexing their muscles.
> It was like being in church
> When the High Mass was said in Latin.
>
> Nobody had a clue, but it made you feel good.
> When it was over, he just walked away,
> Long-legged and in a big hurry.
> The rest of us taking our time to disperse. (BGD 19)

The man who starts talking in French about the greatness of the French writer, Marcel Proust, entrances the public and casts a spell on it. The crowd, familiar with the political and social speeches by the speakers,

walks back to the man. They are not attracted by the content of the man's speech (Nobody had a clue). He seems to speak French. The irresistibility derives from the form of the speech and the possibility of its content. The form of the speech is compared to the "High Mass", which is said in Latin. The words are unknown, yet they work like a portent. They are the visible signs of an invisible world. They give the hidden a form. What is said is not important. The focus is on how it is said. "Nobody had a clue, but it made you feel good". The speaker talks, seemingly, with a melodic voice (like being in church / When the High Mass was said in Latin) and thus casts a spell on the public, which, consequently feels a kind of satisfaction. As the content is not specified, the listeners are open to give the form their own content. The content is free, he can choose whatever he wishes. The listener, incited by the beauty of the outward appearance, can and must create his own interpretation of the content.

The openness of mystery, its elusiveness and its beauty fascinates Simic. Nothing is specified, fixed and concrete. Simic is attracted by the hidden, the secret, because it allows him to create his own world, because it makes him "feel good". Ultimately, the mystery is another form of experience. It is here that Simic can start his metaphysical musing, where he can sail to another world and imagine a world of gods and devils. As he writes in "The Writings of the Mystic": "While you turn to the first page / Which speaks of a presentiment / Of a higher existence / In things familiar and drab..." (WFUV 31). The mystics open a new way of seeing reality. They throw a new light on the familiar and drab. They change the world and offer Simic a new way of perceiving life. The mystics, like the blues singer, the folk ballads and the nursery rhymes allow Simic to broaden his horizon and to dive into the myriad possibilities life has to offer.

From *Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1983), *The World Doesn't End* (1989) and *The Book of God and Devils* (1990), Simic starts and continues to explore the troubling aspects of life. War, history, death, poverty, social inequality are high on his agenda. But Simic's poetry in these years does not become utterly bleak. His use of fantastic imagery gives these poems an air of lightness as in one of the prose poems where "In the fourth year of war, Hermes showed up. He was not much to look at" (WDE 14). The best poems in these years are the ones where Simic is able to find startling juxtapositions, when he is able to mix the holy with the profane and when he entertains the reader with jokes.

The poetry in those years is also increasingly concerned with his personal quest for meaning in a world forsaken by God as in "Cold Blue Tinge" (WFUV 13). In *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990), the urge to articulate this search is prominent as in "The Gods" (BGD 57), "The Initiate" (BGD 59-61), "Babylon" (BGD 63) or "Evening Talk" (BGD 20). These poems speak of our need to reach an understanding of our existence.

They are a request for an answer. But despite the seriousness of the subject these poems are not as harsh or demoralising as "Cold Blue Tinge". Often Simic throws in a comical element as in "A Letter" (BGD 7): "Dear philosophers, I get sad when I think. / Is it the same with you? / Just as I am about to sink my teeth into the noumenon, / Some old girlfriend comes to distract me." In these poems Simic still clings almost automatically to his technique of juxtaposition and the combination of opposing ideas. The poems in *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990) show that Simic has mastered his style, yet often, it results in mannerisms.

Simic's poetry, on the whole, is the triumph of experience over theory. The conclusion of his poetic endeavours is often paradox. This is because Simic believes that the only thing we have is experience. In some way, Simic starts out like Descartes or, Augustine, from nothing but the fact that he exists due to his consciousness. He doubts every theory and believes only what he sees, feels and hears. Only the authentic is allowed. However, Simic's poetry is not a philosophical endeavour. His poetry does not lead to a conclusion. Simic attempts to express the moment he experiences. As his experiences are many-layered, varied and paradoxical, so is Simic's poetry. The world does not end and the blues is unending as well, because every moment has its own unique identity. This is what Simic wishes to describe in his poetry: life in all its complexity, its beauty and its ugliness, its comedy and its tragedy, its laughter and its tears. Although Simic experiences doubts at the core of his being, he is, nevertheless, thrilled by the fact that he lives at all. In his essay on the poet "Jane Kenyon", Simic argues:

> How strange I should be alive in this very moment. How strange the knowledge that I shall die one day. These facts are faced again and again in poems. The awe, the terrifying realization that this should be so is not easy to put into words. The drama of being unable to say what we feel most deeply is the subject of lyric poems…. The experience of the naked moment is incommunicable except in the finest lyric poetry. (OF 72)

For Simic, the realisation that we live and are doomed to die one day is one of the strongest realisations we can have. To make ourselves conscious of the fact that we exist and that we are bound to disappear is one of the tasks that Simic has given himself.

VI Hotel Insomnia

Simic's suffers from insomnia but the bitter condition has sweetly enriched his poetry. In the essay "My Insomnia and I" (1993), Simic argues that "I would not have been the same man if I had been able to sleep well in my life" (OF 48). His inability to sleep, as he writes jokingly in this essay, started at the age of twelve when he fell in love and started to "imagine what was under her black skirt" (OF 48). The sleeplessness is, initially, Simic tells us *cum grano salis*, a side-effect of his wonder and curiosity about love and sexuality. But in the essay Simic explains that he thought "her name was Maria, but it was really insomnia" (OF 48). He will keep a life-long relation with "her". However, it does not stop at that point. Later his sleepless "mind was like Ulysses. We took sea voyages. We were often in the South Seas and China. In nineteenth-century London and St. Petersburg we were afraid" (OF 48). In his sleepless hours Simic uses his imagination to travel to far away places. These travels are also journeys into the past. He held even "conversations with old philosophers, mystics and death camp prisoners" (OF 48). In this time he wanders around in the realm of imagination. He also dives into his own past: "The child I was often came to visit me" (OF 49). But over the years of his insomniac experience Simic comes to the conclusion: "So many judges, so little justice in the world! Murder is a folk art, it occurred to me in my fiftieth year" (OF 49).

The inability to sleep opens the world of imagination and silence to Simic. He receives, in these silent hours, the possibility of revisiting his past and debating the ideas of philosophers and mystics. During the time when he lies in bed, fully conscious and in absolute silence, his meditation is intense and focused. It might be argued that Simic's sleepless hours are his "monastic solitude".[45] In this period Simic gains the necessary distance from experience. He can think about what he saw, felt and thought. During these hours he can come nearest to what he calls "maternal silence". In the poem "The Congress of the Insomniacs" (HI 2), Simic argues that "sleeplessness is like metaphysics". His sleeplessness is not only a state in which he finds himself. It is as well a method of achieving knowledge. In metaphysics the philosopher is trying to establish the fundamentals of his theory. To prove these fundamentals is difficult; they usually remain in the dark and are unexplainable. In the darkness and silence of the night, Simic is convinced that the maternal silence can be translated into poetry. And sleeplessness gives him the opportunity to hear or come near to the voice of this silence.

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[45] In the interview with Starbuck (1975) Simic uses this notion in order to stress the importance of silence for his poetry, UC 45.

But insomnia is not only metaphysics. In "Insomniacs Debating Society" (J 57), Simic stresses the dialogic aspect of his long sleepless nights, when he debates, with himself, the pros and cons of an argument. In "The Church of Insomnia" (WH 29), the bed becomes an "altar" and a huge congregation of insomniacs listens to the works of "Jonathan Edwards". In "Mirrors at 4 A.M." (WBC 2), Simic tries to get a glimpse of the infinite. On the whole, insomnia works like meditation for Simic. It is a phase in which the poet tries to get a glimpse of our metaphysical sources, where he roams in the fields of imagination, where he visits the places of his past. It is important to notice that Simic, who calls himself a "poor dreamer", takes a conscious approach. His past does not resurface by way of dreams. His metaphysical conclusions are taken consciously. In "Hotel Insomnia" (HI 12), Simic describes a sleepless night.

I liked my little hole,
Its window facing a brick wall.
Next door there was a piano.
A few evenings a month
A crippled old man came to play
“My Blue Heaven.”

Mostly, though, it was quiet.
Each room with its spider in heavy overcoat
Catching his fly with a web
Of cigarette smoke and revery.
So dark,
I could not see my face in the shaving mirror.

At 5 A.M. the sound of the bare feet upstairs.
The “Gypsy” fortuneteller,
Whose storefront is on the corner,
Going to pee after a night of love.
Once, too, the sound of a child sobbing.
So near it was, I thought
For a moment, I was sobbing myself.

In the first stanza Simic describes his room as a "hole". To reinforce the atmosphere of shabbiness and poverty the window of the room has only a poor vista to offer: "a brick wall". Simic’s hole, though, is not a prison. The reference to the "piano" and the song "My Blue Heaven" points to the vastness of the sky. The song counterbalances the physical restriction, which the poet experiences in his "hole". With the help of music the poet is able to endure and even find pleasure in his room: "I liked my little hole".

The song, especially the word "heaven", might be interpreted as a hint at the possibilities which insomnia has to offer. The fact that Simic locates his room in a shabby hotel in order to contrast it to the "heaven" certainly underlines this idea.

The second stanza leads us again back to the decayed building. Quietness and darkness reign and a spider tries to catch flies. But these negative attributes change their quality once the allusion to the spider is analysed. The spider does not catch the fly in a web. The web is made out of "cigarette smoke and revery". Who is the spider in this text? Obviously, the spider is the poet himself. He smokes in the darkness and he tries to catch his fly with the help of imagination and revery. In the quietness and darkness of the night the poet waits for his fly, his nutrition, his food for thought. Apart from the obvious fact that it is usually quiet at night, the calm can certainly be seen as a reference to concentration. The darkness, which hinders the poet from seeing his face in the mirror, reinforces the idea that the poet is in a state where his physical being and his ego are neutralised. He is reduced to his observing consciousness.

In the last stanza Simic refers to love making. It is "4 A.M.". The night is almost over. A new day begins. In the essay "My Insomnia and I" (1994), Simic describes insomnia as if she were his beloved. Insomnia lies by his side until dawn breaks. "And then, just as the day was breaking, I smiled to myself, as I felt my love leaving myself" (OF 49). The love-making of the "Gypsy" can be compared to Simic's relationship with insomnia. To lie sleepless in bed, to listen to the music of the night, its silence and to catch "flies" is what Simic finds pleasurable. The child, whose sobbing is perceived by the poet, "for a moment" as his own, also shows another important aspect of his sleeplessness: sympathy. Simic is able to identify with what surrounds him. The child's sobbing is so near that he is unable to realise if it is his or the child's sobbing. His conscious mind is so focused on his environment that, for a moment, he is able to transcend himself and enter into another person's world. The fact that Simic alludes to the mirror in the second stanza, in which he cannot recognise himself due to the darkness, reinforces the idea that Simic's consciousness is focused primarily on what surrounds him and not on himself. With the help of insomnia Simic is able to transcend his own ego and enter, momentarily, into another world. In the silence and darkness of the night, fully awake and conscious of the world, Simic becomes a metaphysician who hopes to decode the secret of the night.

Simic's last four books of poetry, *Hotel Insomnia* (1992), *A Wedding in Hell* (1994), *Walking the Black Cat* (1996) and *Jackstraws* (1999), do not change radically compared to his earlier work. Most of the ideas and images that he developed in his poetry between *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) and *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990) reappear in

these volumes. Mythological allusions ("Makers of Labyrinths" (HI 14-15), mystery ("Miss Nostradamus" (HI 20)), war ("Make Yourself Invisible" (WBC 61)) and the past ("Childhood at the Movies" (WH 5)) re-emerge in his latest work.

The critic, Brian Henry, for example, writes about Simic's most recent book *Jackstraws* (1999), that "complacency, with its resulting predictability, emerges as the foremost threat to his work".[46] But Simic's work is not stuck and has not become utterly predictable. His development is evolving along a slow but stable path. His poetry is characterised by variation of similar ideas rather than by constant innovation. In the interview with Starbuck (1975), Simic describes the poem *White* (1972) as "a final statement of" an "impulse" (UC 32) to write object poems. The word "impulse" shows that Simic writes poetry out of an inner impetus. As long as this impetus or need is not satisfied, Simic obeys it. Once it has exhausted itself, the poet can move on and enter different fields. Simic's work evolves organically. Simic works slowly because he needs time for feelings, memories and ideas to resolve, as he tells Starbuck (1975).

Although his recent poetry is similar to his earlier, the poems change as far as tone and style are concerned. Simic's latest work is more compact. The images become more poignant and enigmatic as in "My Quarrel With the Infinite" (HI 61), where a "single scarecrow on the horizon" is "Directing the traffic / Of crows and their shadows", or as in "Leaves" (WH 46), where Simic writes about "Lovers who take pleasure / In the company of trees". He not only juxtaposes unfamiliar ideas. He now works much more with contrast and paradox in order to achieve a stronger impact. His style becomes more dense and concise. Ellipses are used more frequently. The minimalism of his early poetry is perfected. In poems such as "Heroic Moment" (WH 30), Simic uses a plain syntax and achieves his effect by the almost rhythmic use of contrasts. "I went bare-assed into the battle...I rode in the company of crows with a red pisspot on my head and a dollhouse knife between my teeth". On the whole, Simic enters a phase of consolidation, in which he does not change his point of view but focuses on style.

While in his early phase until the long poem *White* (1972) Simic is predominantly concerned with ideas of poetry, in his second phase, from *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) to 1982, he concentrates on the past. From that point onwards, until *The Book of Gods and Devils* (1990), Simic centres his ideas more on history and on life in the city. The

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[46] Brian, Henry, "*Jackstraws*", *Boston Review*, 1999 <http://bostonreview.mit edu/BR24.3/henry.html>.

latest phase could be described as a refinement of what he had done between 1974 to 1990. The refinement is chiefly centred around language.

In *Hotel Insomnia* (1992), Simic deplores the dismal condition of modern society. The tone, unlike in his earlier poetry, is more accusatory. In "The City" (HI 5), Simic describes a city-life scene as, for example, in "December" (UB 3). The allusion to crucifixion, pain and God gives the poem a stinging quality.

> At least one crucified at every corner.
> The eyes of a mystic, madman, murderer.
> They know it's truly for nothing.
> The eyes do. All the martyr's sufferings
> On parade. Exalted mother of us all
> Tending her bundles on the sidewalk,
> Speaking to each as if it were a holy child.
>
> There were many who saw none of this.
> A couple lingered on kissing lustily
> Right where someone lay under a newspaper.
> His bloody feet, swollen twice their size,
> Jutted out into the cold of the day,
> Grim proofs of a new doctrine.
>
> I tell you, I was afraid. A man screamed
> And continued walking as if nothing had happened.
> Everyone whose eyes I sought avoided mine.
> Was I beginning to resemble him a little?
> I had no answer to any of these questions.
> Neither did the crucified on the next corner.

Simic leaves out detail. His city is reduced to a "corner" and a "sidewalk". One does not know what city he is in, though Simic explains that these city poems are "a kind of homage to New York".[47] The city that Simic describes in this poem is a state not a place. The effect of leaving out detail gives the poem a dream-like quality. The reader is transported to a place that is reduced to a minimum. The atmosphere in the poem is not achieved by a meticulous description of the environment. Rather, words like "crucified", "murderer", "exalted", "bloody", "grim" and "afraid" give the poem its sombre quality. As in his earlier poetry, Simic uses a few brush-strokes to

[47] D.J.R., Bruckner, "The Smiles and Chills in the Poetry of Charles Simic", *New York Times Book Review*, May 28, 1990 <http://search1.nytimes.c.../ fastweb? getdoc+book-news+booknews-arch+21014+1+wAAA +simi>.

hint at the background. The focus is on the inner world, the world the poet perceives.

Simic's city is a state of the mind. It is the city that he sees when walking through the streets. Murderers, crucified men and martyrs people the street, not ordinary people. It is not simply beggars that he sees. The people are, through his imaginings, elevated. The comparison of the people to "martyrs" and "crucified" gives their shapes a deeper content. The sentence "There were many who saw none of this" clearly indicates that what Simic sees is not disclosed to everyone.

Simic is not just describing a city scene. He is criticising it. The city, with its poor and homeless beggars is depicted as a place of chaos and craziness. Every martyr tries to provoke attention. The line "All the martyr's sufferings / On parade" indicates that Simic experiences the exalted behaviour of the beggars as a show that lacks the essential authenticity. And the beggars themselves seem to be convinced that "it's truly for nothing" as the people walk by without noticing them as the kissing couple in the second stanza suggests.

The couple in the second stanza, who carelessly neglects the beggar, whose swollen feet contrast sharply to the martyrs of the first stanza, can be seen as a metaphor of the self-centred culture of our day. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with him or herself. No one really observes or takes even care of the other. The beggar with his swollen feet is ignored and his "bloody feet" become the "grim proofs of a new doctrine". The doctrine is not specified by Simic. But one can assume that the exalted self-centred behaviour, which is not to be compared with Simic's idea of individualism and freedom, is the new principle.

In the last stanza a man starts to scream and no one, except for the poet, takes notice. The poet tries to establish eye contact with the people. But the men ignore him as the couple ignored the beggar. Fear takes hold of the poet. Is he like the screaming man? Has he become, with his interest and preoccupation in observation, a lunatic, an exile of the city, an exotic bird in the midst of the jungle of the city? He has no answer to it. Simic is unable to escape the maze of the city. Even the crucified, the living Jesus around the corner, who allegedly holds the key to his question, cannot answer his request. There is a sense of forlornness. But the tone of the poem, its atmosphere, also tells of a growing sense of unease and aggression. The image of the "bloody feet" and words like "grim" and "avoid" underline Simic's mounting resistance to the depressing state in which people might find themselves. Unlike in the poem "December" (UB 3), Simic is now not just contemplating the scene. He is criticising the state in which he finds himself in the city.

The growing unease that is on the brink of aggression is likewise obvious in the "Lost Glove" (HI 50). In this poem Simic uses the image of

a glove, which slowly turns into a fist, as a means to express the tightening of the atmosphere in the city.

Here's a woman's black glove.
It ought to mean something.
A thoughtful stranger left it
On the red mailbox at the corner.

Three days the sky was troubled,
Then today a few snowflakes fell
On the glove, which someone,
In the meantime, had turned over,
So that its fingers could close

A little ... Not yet a fist.
So I waited, with the night coming.
Something told me not to move.
Here where flames rise from trash barrels,
And the homeless sleep standing up.

The glove is not just a thing carelessly thrown away. A "thoughtful stranger" has placed it there. Simic wants the glove to be significant. "It ought to mean something." It is a woman's glove and it is black. The allusion to "woman" indicates that the glove, in the beginning, is seen as weak and fragile. The glove is put on a red mailbox. It looks like a work of modern art that is put on a pedestal for all to see. In the second stanza bad weather rules like in many of Simic's poems. It is winter, cold, freezing. The fact that winter, the month of November, rain and snow often appear in his poetry should not lead to the conclusion that Simic, at the core of his heart, is a pessimist. Often the grey atmosphere has, finally, something comforting or lusty to offer as in "Country Lunch" (HI 31), the "Friends of Heraclitus" (WBC 7) or "Café Paradiso" (WBC 39). The glove, through the freezing cold, stiffens and slowly, yet not fully, transforms into a fist. The slow transformation, which in the course of the poem will not fully develop into a fist, can be read as a sign of the mounting aggression that is due to unfold. The poet observes the scene in the slum, where the homeless sleep standing. The fact that he does not "move" shows that the situation is tight. The allusion to "fire" clearly is a reference to the possibility of aggression and violence. The lost glove becomes a symbol for the lost class of people, the homeless and poor. The glove can turn into a fist, signifying aggression and violence. Simic waits, without moving, for an eruption of violence.

The poem, on the whole, is political and I would agree with the critic, Helen Vendler, that Simic "is certainly the best political poet, in a

large sense, on the American scene".[48] Simic's criticism is not stated directly, obviously and flatly. As in the "Lost Glove" (HI 50), Simic formulates his criticism via tone and atmosphere. Simic "waits" for the eruption of violence to take place. He observes the scenery, but images like "trash barrels" and the homeless who sleep standing up carry enough weight to emphasise his criticism. Simic's disapproval is understated because he only alludes to violence. From the point of view of style it is interesting that Simic never makes use of words like *violence, fight, aggression* or *confrontation*. The poet just makes use of an image and starts to expand on the metaphor. But words such as "flames", "snowflakes" and expressions such as "not to move" and "sleep standing up" create a high-tension atmosphere, nonetheless. By reducing the setting to a minimum and by using images that are both simple and fit for elaboration and extension, Simic can achieve a strong effect with little means.

Simic cultivates an aesthetic of the minimum. For him, less seems to be more. Simic almost totally rejects fanciful diction. Usually, he remains colloquial, but his style, nonetheless, is rarely flat. Simic tends to use simple, everyday images. By elaborating on them, trying to expand them, he achieves a strong and compact construction. In "Folk Songs" (HI 25), Simic opens the poem with the line "Sausage-makers of History, / The bloody kind". The two lines are simple to understand and the reader immediately realises that the poet mocks the dictators of the past. The ironic tone is continued in the three subsequent lines, where Simic writes: "You all hail from a village / Where the dog barking at the moon / Is the only poet." With the means of clarity and brevity Simic is able to produce a poignant atmosphere. Simic feeds on simple images and he seldom tries to make use of traditional, well-known metaphors. He rather invents new powerful images as in "Quick Eats" (HI 34-35), where "Trees like evangelists / On their rostrums, / Arms raised in blessing over the evening field" speak of Simic's creativeness.

Simic's style is characterised by vagueness in relation to the time and to the place of an event or an emotion. As in "Streets Paved with Gold" (J 19), Simic only hints at the news that he read in journals or saw on television. "Our prisons are dangerously overcrowded / And seething with violence, I've read today". Or as in "Documentary" (WH 16), where the poet "saw a city burning on TV". Simic does not tell the reader which prison in particular is overcrowded and where and when he read the article. He does not supply the name of the city and he does not tell on which channel he watched the documentary. For Simic, it is of no importance

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[48] Helen, Vendler, "Totemic Sifting: Charles Simic's *The Book of Gods and Devils, Hotel Insomnia* and *Dime-Store Alchemy*", Weigl, 132.

which city is burning. Too many, as far as his war memories are concerned, have been bombed and destroyed. What is of interest to Simic is the fact that yet another city is burning, that too many prisons are again overcrowded and that people are in pain. It is the universality of pain that Simic wants to highlight. The pain, in this instance, does not require a particular face as it is perceived as ubiquitous. A short allusion to the "city" and "prison" suffices.

Another stylistic feature, that reappears more often after the poem "Toward Nightfall" (UB 6-8) in the volume *Unending Blues* (1986), is the comparison of contemporary people to mythological or historical figures. By this means Simic shows not only his predilection for myth and history. He also wishes to establish a connection with the past. The effect of this device is that the people he compares and even equates with the historical or mythological figures are seen differently. Their importance and value rises. The beggar is not just a beggar. He becomes a super hero, a "Spider Man" as in "The Beggar on Houston Street" (WH 31). Or, all of a sudden, a "longhaired Jesus" drives down in an open convertible as in "Hot Night" (WBC 76).

In "Early Morning in July" (HI 59), Simic transforms a simple street scene into a historical and mythological collage.

The streets were cool
After the heat of the night.
The dives, their doors open,
Smelled of stale beer.
Someone swept the floor
With even strokes.
He was pale as Confucius.
Martha Washington, her hair in a beehive,
Yawned in the glass booth
Of a movie theatre.

Yesterday I saw Ulysses
Make Greek pastry.
Joan of Arc was at the dry cleaner’s
Standing on a chair
With pins in her mouth.
St. Francis sold piranhas in a pet store.
At midnight Circe’s daughters
Flew on a motorcycle.
Thomas Alva Edison
Roamed the streets in white socks
And blood on his shirt.

And now this sea breeze,
This unexpected coolness.
The small, sickly tree on your block
Hasn't grown much in years.
It shivers with happiness
With its few remaining leaves,
As if Emanuel Swedenborg
Was now whispering to the spirits
On Eighth Avenue.

The setting is reduced to a minimum again, although Simic this time provides some additional details to create an atmosphere of relaxation and ease. The coolness of the sea breeze, which contrasts to the night heat, indicates freshness and change. The heat of the night, although not explicitly stated, is obviously experienced as tightening. The breeze not only loosens the grip of the heat, but is also a sign of hope and happiness. It is in this mood that Simic, walking down the urban streets, sees Ulysses, the hero of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, or Edison, the great American inventor. The people in the streets are, in Simic's imaginations, changed into men of historical and mythical proportions. In this mood, where even the "sickly tree" shivers with "happiness", everything receives an outward glamour.

The comparison and identification of the baker with Ulysses, the pet shop clerk with St. Francis, who was able to talk to animals, and a woman in a dry cleaner's shop with Joan of Arc is a result of the lifted mood of the poet. The people look more beautiful and powerful. They resemble the important and mighty figures of history. This presence bears hope, happiness and strength. The historical and mythical figures to whom Simic refers are exclusive specimens of the progressive tree of mankind. All of them have excelled through outstanding and lasting deeds. To compare the simple man with these figures implies that Simic tries to surround the average man with the aura of the exceptional. By providing this aura to the average man, Simic elevates him to a higher, more important level. Due to the comparison they leave the realm of the everyday, the oppressing and tightening atmosphere of the heat, and are transported on a pedestal that throws the limelight on their uniqueness. The lifting breeze is raising hopes that anyone can live up to his possibilities and resemble the heroes.

From 1990 onwards, the style in his war poetry changes. In *A Wedding in Hell*, which was published in 1994, in the midst of the war in Bosnia, Simic is again haunted by the horror of bloodshed and devastation. This time the experience of war as a child in Yugoslavia is intermingled with the pictures that Simic sees on television screens and in newspapers.

In "Haunted Mind" (WH 9), Simic describes a scene where war is perceived on a television in a "neighborhood dive".

> Savageries to come,
> Cities smelling of death already,
> What idol will you worship,
> Whose icy heart?
>
> One cold Thursday night,
> In a neighborhood dive,
> I watched the Beast of War
> Lick its sex on TV.
>
> There were three other customers:
> Mary sitting in old Joe's lap,
> Her crazy son in the corner
> With arms spread wide over the pinball machine.

In the essay, "Notes on Poetry and History" (1984), Simic describes how one night he came home late from a party and turned on the television. The channel showed a summary of the day's action in the field during the Vietnam war. "I was already undressed and sipping a beer when they showed a helicopter strafing some running figures... One could see how the bodies twitched and jumped after being repeatedly hit. It occurred to me that this had been filmed only hours ago... I remember standing there a long, long time not knowing what to do with myself, feeling the strangeness, the monstrosity of my situation" (UC 124). This passive participation leaves Simic paralysed and unable to respond to the growing unease he experiences in this situation. The paradox of the television experience — to be present and simultaneously absent — makes him shudder.

The fact that television has a great impact on our lives is reflected in Simic's poetry. The strangeness of our everyday television experience is analysed by the poet. While in "Haunted Mind" (WH 9) the "beast of war" licks his sex, "Mary" sits in "old Joe's" lap as if nothing had happened. This is the monstrosity of it. While in some other place people are killed, one sits in his warm and comfortable nest, watching the horrors of war, without feeling the need or being able to change anything about the situation. With the help of television one is seemingly able to follow the latest events, to see how war evolves and develops. One is led to believe to have reached a God-like omnipresence. Or, as Simic writes in "Paradise Motel" (WH 10), soldiers and refugees "naturally, they all vanished / With the touch of the hand". One can perform a magical act, but one's hands are

actually tied. The people do not even respond to the images, either unwilling or unable to react to this virtual reality.

In "Notes on Poetry and History" (1984), Simic explains that television gives us the "raw data of history…so soon after the event and in such detail that makes each one of us a voyeur" (UC 125). The allusion to "the beast of war" that licks its sex can be seen as a reference to the irresistible attraction that war images have on television. To watch bombs falling on people is fascinating and horrible at the same time. It is like watching the neighbours making love. It is perceived as wrong-doing, nevertheless, it seems luring and tempting.

In "Haunted Mind" (WH 9), Simic opens the poem with a premonition, giving the poem an enigmatic atmosphere. As in most of his best poems, Simic does not remain solely within the sphere of the mysterious. He juxtaposes the first stanza, whose atmosphere is heightened by words such as "idol", "worship" and "death", with everyday expressions such as "neighborhood dive", "TV" or "pinball machine". Simic does not try to find metaphors for the television or the pinball machine in order to make his poem sound more elevated. Simic intentionally breaks the style of the first stanza and mixes it with colloquial expressions. It is this juxtaposition of high language ("savageries to come") or strange and brutal images ("Beast of War") with plain language ("Mary sitting in old Joe's lap") or simple objects ("TV") that creates a tension that makes his poetry interesting and captivating. The blending of two separate worlds, television and reality, war and peace, high language and everyday language is a convincing strategy that makes Simic's style captivating.

In "Documentary" (WH 16), Simic criticises the way war is represented on television. Instead of depicting the sufferings of people, the camera eye is in search for the scene with the strongest impact on the viewer.

Today I saw a city burning on TV.
Someone distant and ghostlike
Walked through the rubble,
And then the camera made a sweep
Of the fiery sky and the clouds.

Alone, stepping carefully,
His head bowed so low — he didn't have a head —
While searching for something
Of no interest to the camera
Which wanted us to admire the sky
With its towers of black smoke,

And the accompanying commentary,
Words about “our tragic age.”
Which I didn’t hear — watching him
Stop and bend over
Just as he vanished from view.

Simic is concerned with the suffering of the individual. The man who walks through the rubble is only of limited interest to the camera. Much more, in order to keep up the interest of the viewer, the camera searches for a far more powerful picture. The lens captures "The fiery sky" instead of the man, who seeks something that he has lost. Simic does not follow the camera eye. He makes up his own news story. He continues to track the man even after he has vanished from the sight of the camera. The man’s fate, his pain and misery loses its attraction to the camera once the column of black smoke towers in the background. The image of devastation offers more entertainment than the person whose life is destroyed by the fire. It is this that Simic criticises. Man should be in the centre of attention. Man’s pain should be stressed and documented. The commentary that speaks of our "tragic age" is ridiculed by the poet with the use of paralipsis as he explains that he "didn’t hear" the utterance and then still draws attention to it. "Our tragic age", Simic seems to imply, allows us to document man’s suffering but, simultaneously, our age neglects man’s pain and suffering and, instead, feeds itself with ever more thrilling images like the black column of smoke. While the camera is in search for the picture with the strongest impact, it fades out the suffering of the man in order to capture the tower of smoke. It is this attitude that Simic cannot endure. For him man remains always in focus, even when the man is not spotted by the lens anymore.

The style in "Documentary" (WH 16) shows a changed Simic at work. Rather than juxtaposing idiosyncratic images for a shocking or joking effect, Simic observes quietly and lets the slowly evolving images speak. Simic tries to achieve a memorable effect as in every poem, but he does it without idiosyncratic metaphors. Though the number of poems that are similar to "Documentary" (WH 16), such as parts of the poem "Pain" (WBC 63), "Late Train" (WBG 65), "Late Arrival" (WH 4) or "Mystic Life" (J 83), is limited, it still shows that Simic has room to manoeuvre and to experiment with a new style.

In "Dark TV Screen" (WH 67), Simic describes the oppressing emotion one can experience after a day in front of the television watching the images of war, devastation and tragedy.

The memory of this day’s evil
Like a meat stall covered with flies.

Soul — flown through the open window.
Heart chewed like a dog's ball.

There's a boot lifted above us all
As in a children's book.
An army boot studded with nails,
While the ants down below scurry.

O Cordelia, my name is Lear. My name is
Primo Levi. I sit naked between
The open window and the dark TV screen,
My hands and sex bathed in the fire of evening.

The television set is off. However, the images of the "day's evil", which are not specified, create a bleak and oppressing atmosphere. The memories are compared to a "meat stall covered with flies". The stench of rotten meat is almost palpable, indicating death and devastation. In this atmosphere the soul has escaped. The oppressing situation is underlined by the image of the "boot" which hovers "above us all". The poet feels helpless and powerless like Shakespeare's King Lear who has lost power over his kingdom. The allusion to the Italian writer Primo Levi, who was a leader of a partisan group in Italy during the Second World War and was deported to Auschwitz in 1944, shows the paralysing helplessness of Simic when confronted with the television images of war.

Simic, like Lear and Levi, feels impotent in his situation. Although he is not personally involved in any war or war-like conflict, he can hardly endure the images that he apparently saw on the screen. In the essay, "Notes on Poetry and History" (1984), Simic explains that "in any case, neither history nor ideology nor psychology with their explanations makes it easier for me to bear the horror of these images" (UC 125). For Simic, the images of death and destruction cannot be explained away. The suffering of the people cannot be reduced or mitigated once the history or the psychology or ideology of a time are clarified. Suffering, for Simic, remains unbearable and, consequently, unacceptable. The strength of his images, the brutality that Simic uses in order to achieve an impact is certainly a result of this attitude. The images of the Vietnam war cannot be rationalised by arguing that the casualties are a result of people fighting for their different ideologies.

The stylistic feature of the poem is opposition. This device mirrors the situation in which the poet finds himself: naked between the open window, freedom, and the dark television. In the first stanza Simic makes use of the oppositions "evil" and "soul", "meat" and "heart" and the verbs "chewed" and "covered" to "flown". In the second stanza Simic contrasts

the terms "army boot" to "children's book" and the verbs "scurry" to "lifted". While one set of images could be grouped under the general term oppression the other group could be labelled freedom. Between these two ends the poet creates the tension. The tension is not eased in the last stanza. The vulnerability of the poet is stressed. He sits naked between the open window and darkness and seems unable to move. His hands and his sex are "bathed in the fire of the evening". Although the adjective "bathed" might be associated to terms like balm, healing and relaxation, the noun "fire" reminds the reader of war, fight and violence. The allusion to Lear, who dies at the end of the tragedy, unable to overcome the grief, stresses the impossibility of escaping tragedy. The mention of the Italian writer Primo Levi, who survived the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, provides some hope and implies that we do not necessarily have to surrender to war.

Although Simic's war poetry is generally bleak and uncompromisingly harsh as far as images are concerned, there are, nevertheless, a number of war poems that shed a different light upon Simic's comprehension of his war experience. In the interview with Starbuck (1975) Simic, asked about the narrative element in his poetry, explains what kind of war poetry he intends to write. "I don't wish to come out and say "I've seen this and that." I've seen terrifying sights. But on the other hand, I wasn't very unique in that.... Men hung from lampposts, whatever. There would be another falseness. All those things did not really astonish me at the time" (UC 35). It becomes clear in the interview, which took place in 1975 that Simic always wanted to get as near as possible to what he really experienced as a child. It is not just the fact that other people saw men hanging from lampposts that hinders him from simply describing such a scene. Simic wants to be authentic. But authenticity does not just mean amassing facts. Simic tries to give a holistic picture of his life and this means that he not only uses the experience of what he saw but also of what he felt. Only by this approach is Simic able to do justice to his own poetic credo: to be true to himself, to try to translate the silent experience into words, to give a mirror-picture of a moment of his life.

In the same essay Simic gives a vivid example of what he means by being authentic:

> To take an instance that happened in 1945, during the occupation of Belgrade by the Russians. My mother was pregnant and in the hospital. There was still some street fighting. The Germans were holed up in some parts of the city. And I remember going with some friends after the street fighting. There was a church which had a large yard, and there were dead German soldiers there, and so we'd go over there, and we'd take from the German soldiers the belts, the ammo-belts, helmets, war-junk such as kids can play

> with. We wouldn't pay attention to things like watches or valuable things. We were interested in the — well, weapons were usually taken by then, but there were a lot of ammo and war-junk. I don't have any nightmares about it. It was all part of this wonderful game we had. And I don't think I have any traumas that I can recognize as a result of it. If you were writing a poem about it, one really has to capture that complicated game. That innocence. One can't say, "I turned over dead Germans to get hold of their holsters". Because it wasn't like that at all. So that's the problem. There was something there, which I can't quite name, but I felt touched and disturbed. But it wasn't any of the obvious things: that here was a dead man, that this was War. (UC 35-36)

Childhood, naivety, playfulness, game, war, death and violence are all connected together. It took Simic a long time to fuse them into a single poem. When the interview was held in 1975, Simic had one year earlier finished the volume *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974). By this time he had written some war poetry like "Marching" (WGS 35) or "War" (WGS 31). In the volume *Classic Ballroom Dances* (1980), Simic often refers to war. This war poetry, however, often lacks the complexity at which Simic aimed. In "Prodigy" (CBD 21), Simic already tried to bind together the idea of game and war. But other aspects did not surface. Simic's development moves along this line: to increase the complexity of the poem but at the same time remaining as simple and poetic as possible.

In the "Massacre of the Innocents" (WH 19), Simic tries to blend the idea of war together with the idea of happiness.

> The poets of the Late Tang Dynasty
> Could do nothing about it except to write:
> "On the western hills the sun sets ...
> horses blown by the whirlwind tread the clouds."
>
> I could not help myself either. I felt joy
> Even at the sight of a crow circling
> As I stretched out on the grass
> Alone now with the silence of the sky.
> Only the wind making a slight rustle
> As it turned the pages of the book by my side,
> Back and forth, searching for something
> For that bloody crow to read.

The modern poet as well as the poets of the "Tang Dynasty" can do nothing about war except to write about it. They can neither change the course of

war nor stop it. The only thing is to use metaphors to put the killing into words. But despite the bleakness of war, the poet finds a kind of happiness, "joy". This contradictory mood, which suddenly lights up, is often perceived in Simic's later poetry. Even the darkest moment can offer some hope and joy as in "The Friends of Heraclitus" (WBC 7-8), where Simic laments the death of a friend only to write in last stanza: "And the sudden terror and exhilaration / At the sight of a girl / Dressed up for a night of dancing / Speeding by on roller skates". Simic does not bind together happiness and war or joy and death in order to provoke. His intention is to describe what he actually feels and thinks. This willingness to be authentic allows him to break taboos. War and joy, which, in lyric poetry, are usually separated, are combined together because Simic feels, at a given moment, joy even in times of war. This is what Simic hints at when he tells Starbuck (1975) about the "innocence" of the child who walks over the corpses of the soldiers. He wishes to give a holistic picture of his moments of life. Happiness in times of war is, in some way, a paradox. But life, for Simic, is essentially paradoxical.

Simic can stretch out in the grass and enjoy the vastness of the blue sky. He is obviously delighted about the rustling of the wind. The crow, the Celtic symbol of war, looms large in the sky. The only thing the poet can offer to the war-bringing bird is a book. The book, poetry, is the only solace that he has to offer. He is aware that he can only offer this much. However, this does not change his attitude towards the beauty of the sky and it does not weaken the delight he experiences when lying on the grass. The two opposing states are experienced simultaneously. For Simic, there is nothing wrong or immoral about that. Life has its paradoxical situations and Simic wants to be true to that.

Another important element of Simic's poetry, which he started to develop in *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), is history. In his later poetry history is depicted as mind-numbing as in "Cameo Appearance" (WBC 6), "Reading History" (WH 55) or "An Address with Exclamations Points" (WBC 9).

I accused History of gluttony;
Happiness of anorexia!

O History, cruel and mystical,
You ate Russia as if it were
A pot of white beans cooked with
Sausage, smoked ribs and ham hocks!

O Happiness, whose every miserly second
Is brimming with eternity!

You sat over a dish of vanilla custard
Without ever touching it!

The silent heavens were peeved!
They made the fair skies at sunset
Flash their teeth and burp from time to time
Till our wedding picture slid off the wall.

The kitchen is closed, the waiters shouted!
No more vineyard snails in garlic butter!
No more ox tripe fried in onions!
We have only tears of happiness left!

The tone of accusation is obvious. The title indicates Simic's anger towards the classifying and distancing concept of history. The exclamation points in almost every line stress Simic's rage. The problem with the idea of history is that it is an abstract, ideological concept. Nevertheless, Simic, by using food metaphors is able to give the abstract notion of history a palpable aspect. Simic describes history as a gluttonous gourmand. Nothing seems to escape it. Even the world's biggest country, Russia, disappears like a pot of white beans into history's stomach.

It is interesting that Simic uses the term "happiness" as a contrasting idea to history. History does not stand directly in opposition to the present or the future. But history, for Simic, is the opposite of the moments of *joy*, *pleasure* and *happiness*. And while history, with obvious appetite, devours the dish that it is being served, happiness abstains. Happiness has to offer a glimpse of eternity, although this experience might only last for a "miserly second". It is this idea which explains the fat body of history and the thinning body of happiness. History expands itself in time and grows larger, while the moments of happiness are short, too short. Although happiness can give man the sensation of eternity, these moments are only seldom experienced. History, which gives the human action a specific shape, logic and meaning and, thus, is able to explain men's action in the world, stretches almost to the infinite. The imagery in the third stanza is strange, almost weird. The silent heavens feel betrayed by the inactivity of happiness and the sky, as in retaliation, belches back. The burping of the sky, although there is no direct indication, can be compared to bombing. The fact that the "wedding picture" falls off the wall shows that the sky and the ground reverberate. As history, in most of Simic's poetry, is connected to the idea of war, one can assume that Simic has bombs in mind when he used the word "burp". The verb "burp" fits in the class of the food metaphors and can therefore be seen as the result of history's gluttony. The more it eats, the more it burps, the more destruction it causes.

In the last stanza the restaurant is closed due to food shortage. Nothing is left except "tears of happiness". Once gluttonous history has devoured all it can, nothing will remain but tears. Simic calls them tears of happiness. But it is obvious that Simic uses the term ironically. Only suffering will remain in the end. But, ironically, as history is deprived of its vital sources, happiness reappears, though at a high price. Only after everything is devoured, destroyed and extinct, happiness becomes a possibility.

In the poem "The History of Costumes" (J 6), Simic again criticises history. This time he contrasts the intellectual concept of history to the real suffering of people.

Top hats and tight-fit monkey suits,
You pointed to the map of the world
With your silver-tipped walking sticks
And fixed my fate forever on a dot.

Already on the very next page,
I saw my white sailor suit parachuting
Among bricks and puffs of smoke
In a building split in half by a bomb,

The smoke that was like the skirts
Slit on the side to give the legs the freedom
To move while dancing the tango
Past ballroom mirrors on page 1944.

The poem evolves like the reading of a history book. On the first page we see the politicians or the ruling class at work. In the second stanza we read about the terrible consequences. Without talking about politicians or books Simic is able to evoke these images by simply hinting at a restricted number of attributes. The "silver-tipped walking stick" and the "Top hats" allude to the ruling class and "page" is associated with the idea of a book. Although Simic does not overtly state it, he reads in a history book.

The minimalism, which is usually at work in his poems, is, in this case, perfectly applied. By reducing everything to a specific class of images, Simic is able to expand on these images ingeniously. The images all belong to the class of costumes as the title indicates. The extension in the second and third stanza, where a white sailor suit is "parachuting" among the debris of war and the allusion to the slit "skirts" are extremely skilful. The sailor suit was a widespread and popular dress for children in the early parts of the twentieth century. Simic might be alluding to his own pre-war childhood in Belgrade. With the war and the bombings these

fashionable children suits fly around like parachutes. The image of the skirt in the last stanza is skilfully and originally transformed. The skirt, used as a dress for ballroom dances, is slit up to provide more freedom for dancing. The skirt in this case is related to the building that is split in half by a bomb and to dancing and to history as well. The skirt was slit to increase the ability to move. One could then assume that the building, like the skirt, was destroyed to allow the generals to march forward without encumbrance.

Simic's critique of history has a deep impact on the way he writes poetry. For him, since the poem "The Lesson" (CC 18-20), the historian's concept of the past is the opposite of experience. In the essay, "Notes on Poetry and History" (1984), Simic explains the difference between the two opposing concepts.

> If history, as it comes through the historian, retains, analyzes, and connects significant events, in contrast, what poets insist on is the history of "unimportant" events. In place of historian's "distance," I want to experience the vulnerability of those participating in tragic events. In other words, Sappho rather than Homer as model. His sacred times, the time of myth, versus her time, which is the moment, forever irreversible. Beginning with Sappho's insomnia, there's a tradition of the poem which says "I exist" in the face of all abstractions of cosmos and history, a poem of a passionate desire for accuracy for the here and now in its miraculous presence. I am not talking about confession. The best poetry of this kind is conspicuous by the absence of the ego. The most reliable "histories" are told by the first-person pronouns who remain subordinate, even anonymous. (UC 126-127)

History divides the "significant" from the "unimportant". For Simic, this division is not acceptable. As he writes in the essay, "Elegy in a Spider's Web" (1993), "only the individual is real" (UFT 37). Everything that happens to the individual is not only of importance but the only fact that really counts. One cannot fade out the fate of the individual. This is what the historian is doing. He writes from a "distance". He focuses on the "significant events" as, for example, the decision of the political heads, the ones with "Top hats" and "silver-tipped walking sticks". The historian looks for decisive moments in time that shape the so-called mass. Therefore, the historian analyses the political centres, ignoring the historical outskirts, where millions of individuals suffer the consequences of a few policy makers.

Simic, aware that the historical analysis dwarfs the simple individual focuses on this individual. He prefers "Sappho's" style to the one of "Homer". While Homer, especially in his *Iliad*, deals only with the warriors

of high birth, gods and demi-gods, for Simic, as well as Sappho, the experience, the "here and now" of any individual is important. What Simic wishes to understand is "the vulnerability of those participating in tragic events". Simic is not interested in abstract summaries. He has a "passionate desire for accuracy", for authenticity. His understanding of the past cannot result in an abstract concept that tries to explain the different ideological strains that seem to shape events. For him the suffering and experience of the individual stand in the centre of attention. Only their "existence" is real. And this kind of history can be written in the first person singular only. Only the individual witnesses of our time are viable sources of history. Therefore, Simic has chosen poetry for his rendering of history. Only in poetry, Simic argues, can he give a real picture of his time. For Simic, history is not only a concept that he criticises. His own poetry is in fact a documentation of his time. He writes history himself, but always from the point of view of the individual. Only his personal experience finds the way into his poetry. Abstractions simplify reality and fade out the suffering and complexity of existence. It is the pain, the fear and the authentic emotion that Simic wants to render in his poetry.

The fact that Simic reiterates this position in his poetry time and again since his interest in the past started to develop is certainly a result of his own war experience. He knew from first-hand experience what it meant to be bombed and persecuted. Simic is, as far as his ideas on humankind are concerned, a pessimist. For him, war, torture, violence and killing are inextricably part of man’s nature. In the same essay Simic continues: "When all is said and done, I understand nothing about the world. I only have forebodings, terrible ones, that the future will bring more crimes and no utopias" (UC 127). This fundamental disposition certainly leads him to repeat the ideas of war, history and individualism over and over again. Therefore, it might be argued that Simic, once he established his own poetic theory and after he experienced the irresistible pull from his own past, kept playing the same tune but with variations. The gloomy attitude towards mankind’s future, the belief that man is inherently violent, keeps him always coming back to these ideas. The wars in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and the many other wars after the end of the Second World War certainly prove Simic’s bleak premonitions to be true.

In his last four books of poetry, *Hotel Insomnia* (1992), *A Wedding in Hell* (1994), *Walking the Black Cat* (1996) and *Jackstraws* (1999), Simic tends to repeat older material. The ideas of war, history, city life, death, the search for God, sensuality and sex reappear in his latest books. This leads critics such as Charles Molesworth to the conclusion that "he is not a poet

who offers the promise of a new subject or a changing music".[49] Simic has his own explanation for these repetitions as he explains in *The Cortland Review* in 1999: "Many of my shortest poems took years to get right. I tinker with most of my poems even after publication. I expect to be revising in my coffin as it is being lowered into the ground".[50] The need for revision and perfection is best exemplified in his volume, *Jackstraws* (1999). In this book, he expands and revises poems that appeared in earlier volumes. An interesting specimen is the poem "My Little Utopia" (J 46).

The first time a poem of this title appears in the volume, *Classic Ballroom Dances*, which was published in 1980. The second time it appears in *Jackstraws*, which was published almost twenty years later in 1999. The poems, although they can be seen as two versions of the same core idea, can be read both as a reshaping of the same poem or as sequels.

No one's quite sure
Why they keep it locked
At night, but they do,
Punctually. At seven

The old night-watchman
Shuffles by yelling
For the wolf and the lamb
To stop grazing.

There are none,
But he yells anyway,
As he fusses,
As he locks the heavy gate ...

I think it's because
Of the classy fence,
The high, wrought-iron fence
With silver spikes. (CBD 53)

Why the high, wrought-iron fence
With sharp spikes
And the four padlocks and a chain
Over the heavy gate?

[49] Charles, Molesworth, "Fondled Memories", *New York Times Book Review*, 12, October 1980, 14.
[50] J.M., Spalding, "Interview; Charles Simic", *The Cortland Review*, 1999 <http:// www.cortlandreview.com/issuefour/interview4.htm>.

I drop by in late afternoon,
Make sure it’s locked,
And peek through the bars
At the rows of sunny flowers,
The tree-lined winding path
Already streaked with shadow,
Masking a couple kissing
As they mosey away from me. (J 48)

The poet does not know the reason why the gates are closed at the beginning of nightfall. They simply are. The watchman does not seem to know why he is doing his work, though he gives himself a reason to create a meaning for his job. But it is a fiction. The wolf and the lamb do not exist. His yelling is superfluous. Nevertheless, it satisfies his need for an explanation. The poet also tries to discover the meaning for the closing of the gates. If "utopia" is encircled by fences, its gate needs to be closed. Does this reasoning satisfy the poet? Obviously not, as the second poem, published almost twenty years later, suggests. The second poem starts where the first one ended: with the description of the fences. Yet, the description is packed in a question. The poet has still not found an explanation for the closed gate. In the second poem Simic arrives earlier to the scene. It’s late afternoon. In the first poem it was early evening. But the doors are locked again. This time he finds two lovers behind the bars. And Simic describes the landscape that opens up behind the bars. There are "rows of sunny flowers" and a "tree-lined winding path". A man and a woman kiss each other. In the second poem the reader can get a glimpse of Simic’s "little utopia", although the view is somewhat blurred as the words "mosey" and "shadow" suggest.

Simic’s utopia "exists", but he cannot enter it. Utopia, which actually means nowhere, is the place of the ideal. In literature it is usually synonymous with a perfect place. In his *Utopia*, for example, Thomas Moore describes his view of the ideal society. Moore describes how society should be organised so that its members might live the best life possible. Simic’s utopia is a forbidden place. He knows only that it is surrounded by "sharp" and "silver spikes" and that its gate is securely padlocked. Only in the second poem Simic receives a vague sense of what this utopia might be: a place in the green where lovers meet.

The vagueness of Simic’s utopia, which is intensified by the falling night in both poems, points to the longing that the poet has for this place. Simic stands on the threshold of utopia but cannot enter it. He only gets a glimpse of that place. Utopia remains nowhere as he is unable to set foot in it. Simic does not locate utopia in a specific environment. He simply

describes it as a place surrounded by seemingly insurmountable fences. Utopia, thus, receives more the quality of a dream than a place. Simic's "little utopia" is the search for lasting happiness and love, an emotion that he is apparently denied. Both utopias share this quality. Yet, in the second poem Simic seems to have come one step closer to it.

As far as style is concerned the second poem is much more down to earth. The lines read like an observation of a simple afternoon scene. Though both poems start with a question as to why the gate is locked, in the first poem the first three lines sound heavier as they pathetically imply that "no one" knows the reason for the closed gates. In the second poem, Simic achieves a much stronger effect by the description of the fence. The "four padlocks" arouse the reader's wonder immediately and the spikes look threateningly in their sharpness. In the second poem, Simic also renounces folklore or fairy tale images as in the first poem, where the "wolf and lamb" appear as imaginations of the watchman. The sense of mystery and secrecy is achieved in the second poem by simple description, while in the first poem Simic uses a fancier style.

In *Jackstraws* (1999), Simic's effort to "mend" his earlier poems continues to manifest itself. In *The World Doesn't End* (1989), Simic writes "the hundred-year-old china doll's head the sea washes up on its gray beach. One would like to know the story. One would like to make it up, make up many stories...With the night coming, one would like to see oneself walking the empty beach and bending down to it" (WDE 25). In "Head of a Doll" (J 64), he comes up with the story:

Whose demon are you,
Whose god? I asked
of the painted mouth
half buried in the sand.

A brooding gull
Made a brief assessment,
And tiptoed away
Nodding to himself.

At dusk a firefly or two
Dowsed its eye pits.
And later, toward midnight,
I even heard mice.

In the second poem, Simic's imagination transforms the head of the doll into an object of former reverence and implies with his suggestive questions that the doll is not just an abandoned object that was washed on

the shore. The gull, that is "brooding", nods at the sight of the doll's head, as if it were able to understand the secret of the doll that the poet tries to decipher. In the third stanza the atmosphere of secrecy is heightened as the animals and insects seem to pay reverence to the doll's head.

We can think of Simic walking along the sea shore and detecting the head of a doll in 1989. The poet feels the wish to make up a story. In 1989 Simic is simply able to sketch down this impulse. Only ten years later is Simic able to write a poem out of this experience. Strangely enough, it seems as if the poem needs to be rewritten again. In "Head of a Doll" (J 64), Simic is not able to create the same sense of wonder as in the prose poem, because the doll is rather perceived as a lost object and the reader is tempted to think of a plastic doll, though Simic does not give a specific reference here. In contrast to the poem in *Jackstraws* (1999), in *The World Doesn't End* (1989), he writes of a "hundred-year-old china doll's head". This sentence is much stronger and the words "hundred-year-old" and "china" trigger more associations. The age and the reference to the material of the doll's head point to old age and wealth. They speak of a time that is lost and forgotten and of a place that inspires our awe. In the prose poem the mysterious atmosphere is achieved by the use of adjectives, while in the later poem this effect is realised by the poet's questions and the fact that the animals behave like humans.

The shift in both content and style of these poems shows that Simic develops his writing over the years but simultaneously revolves around the same or similar ideas. This circling around the same topics may lead to the conclusion that Simic is trapped in mannerisms. However, these poems likewise show that his ideas have subtly changed and that his stylistic approach to these ideas has grown. Simic uses less decorum from 1990 onwards and is able to achieve a stronger effect with a seemingly simpler language.

But like any other poet, Simic's poetry has its flaws. There are blemishes and sometimes minor and sometimes bigger mistakes. Many of the poems about his idea of God in his later work are somewhat clumsy such as "To the One Upstairs" (J 63).

> Boss of all bosses of the universe
> Mr. Know-it-all, wheeler-dealer, wire-puller,
> And whatever else you're good at.

The first three lines of this poem are enough to show in what an obvious and seemingly flat way Simic tries to vent his anger against God. Simic tries — with a combination of nursery rhymes and colloquialism — to give the poem a queer touch. However, the images seem overused and fail to

arouse a comic effect. But then, in the same volume, Simic is able to find such fitting and new images as in "Mystic Life" (J 82-85).

> It's like fishing in the dark
> If you ask me:
> Our thoughts are the hooks,
> Our hearts the raw bait.
>
> We cast the line over our heads,
> Past all believing,
> Into the starless midnight sky,
> Until it's lost to sight.
>
> The line's long unravelling
> Rising in our throats like a sigh
> Of a long-day's weariness,
> Soul-searching and revery.

In the first part of "Mystic Life" (J 82-85), Simic compares life to fishing. He sticks to this metaphor and expands on it as in his earlier poems. In "Mystic Life" (J 82-85), the strength comes from the direct juxtaposition of the abstract and the concrete. The line "we cast the line over our heads" receives a melancholic colouring when read in the context of the following line: "Past all believing". The same is true for the first and second line in the third stanza. Unlike in his earlier poems, such as "Ax" (CP 39), where he rarely mixes abstract and concrete images in the same stanza, Simic is now able to intertwine these antagonists. The poem, despite this juxtaposition, does not sound pathetic or anachronistic. What improves the quality of the poem is that the juxtapositions come on tiptoe unlike in "To Think Clearly" (HI 32), where Simic pompously combines the images of a pig and an angel.

This new quality in Simic's poetry, that shows a calm and experienced mind at work, is not detected in his earlier poems. The fact that Simic turned sixty in 1998 and that some of his youthful exaggerations would probably sound odd now, can serve as an explanation for this change in tone and style. But despite the bleak and sometimes depressing tone of some of his poems, Simic has not lost his joking spirit. On the contrary, in the interview with *The Cortland Review* in 1999 the interviewer asked Simic to give him a final thought at the end of the discussion. Simic answered: "Mangia molto, caca forte, I nia paura de la morte".[51] This joking answer is reminiscent of the motto of the poem, "The Chicken

[51] Spalding.

Without a Head" (RPLGM 67-70), "*There's nothing more serious than a joke*", and shows that Simic has not yet given up his high spirits and has maintained his love for life.

VII Wonderful Words, Silent Truth

Simic's poetic development can be divided into four parts. The first part comprises the years from 1955 until the publication of the long poem *White* in 1972. These years can be summarised as a time of wandering and search. This period culminates in the discovery and establishment of his fundamental idea of poetry as an orphan of silence. The second part spans the years from 1974 to 1982 and comprises those books in which Simic starts to explore his experiences of childhood and youth. The predominant themes are war and death. In the third part, from 1983 to 1990, Simic's poetry becomes stylistically more refined with an increasingly balanced use of his startling images that are combined with folk and jazz elements. Simultaneously, his poems are more concerned about the hardship of life and his interest shifts towards the life in the city and the difficulty of living in it. His poetry becomes politically more committed and the tone of his poems is more aggressive. His thinking about history, social inequality and death also lead him to question the idea of God. His scepticism, though, does not result in atheism. Religion and mysticism remain part of his poetry.

From 1990 to 1999, Simic's poetic endeavour moves into two directions. While the majority of the poems in the last decade can be read as answers or sequels to his earlier poems, there are a limited number of poems that are less aggressive in tone and lack the exuberant imagery for which he is famed. These poems are generally longer and read like interior monologues such as "Talking to the Ceiling" (J 74-81) or "Mystic Life" (J 82-85). The poems are small philosophical arguments he seems to hold with himself during his insomniac nights. The mood of the poems is gentle, soft and the poems speak of the wisdom Simic has attained over the years.

From 1955 until 1972 Simic is predominantly occupied with the articulation of his idea of poetry. Simic is an avid reader of poetry. He is attracted by French surrealist poetry, and he is very interested in the school of abstract expressionism. The activity as a translator makes him realise that his poetic quest is the translation of our mute experience into language. His metaphoric definition of poetry as an "orphan of silence" dates back to 1968 and is a consequence of his thinking about translation. Simic admits that poetry cannot fully render experience, nevertheless, he denies Robert Frost's definition of poetry as "what is lost in translation". For Simic, poetry is able to translate our experience into words. In an interview published in *Artful Dodge* in 1992, Simic still sticks to the ideas that he developed almost thirty years earlier. The wish to describe experience

"involves the belief that I'll find a way to recover that lost paradise".[52] This belief is not only the starting point of Simic's poetry, moreover, it remains at the core of Simic's thinking about poetry in his later years.

Simic's theoretical thinking about poetry results in the so-called object poems, where he tries to establish a contact with every-day objects such as shoes, forks or spoons. The poems are silent mediations, imaginative re-enactments of the initial mute experience. His meditations on these objects allow Simic to get hold of reality. They are the proof that a contact with the outside world is possible. Simic continues writing object poems until the long poem *White* (1972), where he tries to articulate, in poetic form, his ideas about poetry. The poem concludes his early phase.

Simic's quest to articulate a poetic theory and find a way that leads to a re-enactment of experience sets him apart from the poetic fashion that reigned in the early fifties and sixties in the United States. With Alan Ginsberg's (1926-1997) long poem, "Howl" (1956), American poetry and literature became increasingly concerned with modern life in the city, sex, drugs, suicide and civil disobedience. Ginsberg's poem, which is both a censure of American society at that time and a description of the life-style of American youth, is explicitly political and aims at provoking the establishment. Lines such as the opening lines of "Howl" — "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the Negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix" — cannot be found in Simic's work.[53] Though he writes occasionally long poems, the syntactic structure of Simic's poems is different from Ginsberg's. Simic's lines are much shorter and he does not use slang as extensively as Ginsberg, nor does Simic describe the bleak side of the American dream as feverishly as Ginsberg does. Simic's poems lack the exuberant and powerful tone in which Ginsberg revels. Simic is far more quiet. While Ginsberg wishes to embrace the whole world, Simic takes one object at the time and analyses it, using unfamiliar metaphors that are inspired by folklore and traditional Serbian poetry. Despite their obvious differences in style and tone, Ginsberg and Simic both share the love for jazz. Both are attracted to this music and both often allude to jazz musicians in their poetry.

All in all, Simic's poetry is more introverted than Ginsberg's but, nevertheless, lacks the confessional tone of the poems of writers such as Robert Lowell (1917-1977), Silvia Plath (1932-1963) or Ann Sexton (1928-1975). The poems in Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) — his most important book — are centred on his childhood experiences. Lowell openly

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[52] Eric, Williams, "A Conversation with Charles Simic", *Artful Dodge,* 1992 <http://www.wooster.edu/ArtfulDodge/ simic.html>.

[53] Alan, Ginsberg, *Selected Poems 1947-1995*, London, Penguin, 1996, 49.

describes his experiences as a soldier during the Second World War, his problems with alcohol and his difficulties of being a family man. Though Simic mentions his father ("George Simic" (RPLGM 43-46)) and his mother ("Spoons with Realistic Dead Flies on Them" (A 14)) in his poetry, his poems are far less personal than for example Lowell's "For Sale".[54] In this poem Lowell describes his mother's reaction after the death of her husband: "Ready, afraid / Of living alone till eighty, / Mother mooned in a window, / as if she had stayed on a train / one stop past her destination". Simic avoids writing of this kind. His biographical material is not presented as bluntly and directly.

Simic's poetry also has little in common with the works of contemporaries such as Gary Snyder (1930-), Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) or Thom Gunn (1929). While Snyder openly criticises the negative effects of modern industrialisation and sees the simple worker as the authentic American and believes that Buddhism is a possibility to free ourselves from society's restrictions, Gunn writes about homosexuality and O'Hara about the modern urban bohemia. Compared to the poetry of his contemporaries, Simic's early poetry seems almost solipsistic. His interest in objects and the lack of almost any explicit reference to the state of American society make his poems look pale in comparison. Simic's poetry lacks the strength of Ginsberg's verse, the clarity of Snyder's poems, the painful openness of Lowell or the wit of O'Hara's New York poems. Simic's poems excel through their silent and meditative voice and through their idiosyncratic imagery. While Ginsberg and Snyder openly criticise and challenge society, Simic concentrates on minimals and tries to explore the imaginative validity of objects.

Simic's work differs from the poetry of his predecessors such as T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) or William Carlos Williams (1883-1936). Unlike Pound or Eliot, Simic rarely alludes to other literary works in his poetry. While it is true that Simic refers to Greek mythology in his work, he does not use it as extensively as, for example, Pound in his *Cantos.* Simic's poem "My Weariness of Epic Proportions" (A 50), where he mentions Achilles, Patroclus and Hector, can be basically understood without an intimate knowledge of Greek mythology. This is not true for many of Pound's Cantos, where the reader is forced to familiarise himself with Greek mythology to grasp the poems' sense. Unlike Eliot, who, for example, for his poem "The Waste Land", relies heavily on James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Simic does not make the understanding of his poems completely dependent on the intimate knowledge of outside sources. While the influence of Serbian poetry can be felt, a reader can still understand

[54] Robert, Lowell, *Life Studies*, London, Faber and Faber, 1985, 90.

Simic's poetry without having to familiarise with Serbian ballads. Simic centres his interest on a single instant, while Pound and Eliot try to embrace history and society as a whole.

Simic's work contrasts sharply to Pound's and Eliot's, but similarities can be detected with the poetry of Stevens and Williams. Like Simic, Stevens and Williams are concerned with detail and refuse to write about generalities and abstract ideas as Pound and Eliot do. Observation is of paramount importance to all three poets. Stevens' lines in "Anecdote of Canna", "Observes the canna with a clinging eye, / Observes and then continues to observe", are true for Simic as well.[55] However, Simic's language lacks Stevens' elegance. A poem such as "The Comedian as the Letter C", where Stevens lavishly plays with the sound "c", can hardly be found in Simic's work.[56] And lines such as "And ah! that Scaramouche / Should have a black barouche", that speak of Stevens' sheer delight for words and rhyme, are not a feature of Simic's poetry.[57] Compared to Williams, who in his work is predominantly concerned with the representation of suburban society, Simic's poetry, however, excels through its use of idiosyncratic images, which in Williams' poetry are rare. While Williams tries to avoid ideas and abstractions and attempts to come as close to the thing in front of him as possible, Simic uses metaphor in order to represent his inner world. Simic's city poems, for example, are not mere descriptions of people or street scenes. In "Early Morning in July" (HI 59), for example, Simic describes the people whom he sees in the street as "Ulysses", "Joan of Arc", "St. Francis" or "Thomas Alva Edison".

From the point of view of style, Simic's early poetry can be compared to that of his contemporaries as he uses free verse. But Simic's poetry is simpler and more reduced. The choice of words is more restricted and the structure of the poems is less complicated. While, for example, Ginsberg and O'Hara make use of enjambment, Simic usually sticks to end-stopped lines. Despite the structural weakness of Simic's early poetry, his images and his use of language are original and refreshing. Compared to his contemporaries, Simic is distinguished for his dry style, for his courage to write about such ordinary things as shoes or forks and for his surreal use of language.

In the second phase, Simic's poetry shows clearly that he has become a disciple of Roethke and that his translations of Serbian poetry have influenced his thinking about poetry and his writing. His poetry is loaded with folklore and nursery rhymes and mythology. Simic's style changes. He leaves the realm of the every-day objects to concentrate more on his

[55] Stevens, 55.
[56] Stevens, 27-46.
[57] Stevens, 61.

personal past. The memories of his childhood days in war-torn Belgrade light up and Simic starts to write about persons. His poetry though does not show the confessional quality of the poetry of Lowell, Plath or Sexton. The "I" in Simic's poems is rarely confessional unlike in the later poetry of Lowell and in the poetry of Plath. Much more, the "I" works like an unpersonal observer.

In his essay, "Charles Simic and Mark Strand: The Presence of Absence", the critic, Richard Jackson, writes: "When the subject presents himself he [Simic] seems to be continually shifting his perspective, to be a signifier whose meaning is deferred, to be, that is, a grammatical function: "I find that in my own poems I tend to abandon the original cause and follow wherever the poem leads. That's why my poems seem often to have an impersonal quality to them. It is not clear who the 'I' is ....I follow the logic of the algebraic equation of words on the page which is unfolding, moving some direction"".[58] In the same essay Jackson quotes Simic: "'I' is an organising principle, a necessary fiction. Actually, I'd put more emphasis on consciousness".[59] Simic is writing from a detached perspective. The "I" is an empty formula that is filled with the poet's observation. The poet is led by the words on the page, which initially are a product of inspiration. Simic follows rather than leads. His technique implies obedience to the impulses of his consciousness. It is as if he were waiting for an ominous sign within him to react spontaneously and organically to the words or objects outside. In the essay, "The Partial Explanation" (1976), Simic writes that the "only principle or technique I'm aware of is faith. Faith to the language and faith to the situation to which that language points. Nothing else" (UC 103).

Simic's ultimate goal is to reach the other through poetry. He wants to attain that which is separated from him by a physical and mental chasm. He believes that the outside world can in some sense be grasped. To reach that the poet requires faith and he has to erase his own mental preconceptions. Only through the process of letting the "I" fall into oblivion is the poet able to reach the other. His autobiographical "I" would hinder him from reaching that goal. In the poem "Eraser" (CC 30), Simic describes the process of letting the "I" go and, thus, reaching a state of pure consciousness.

> A summons because the marvellous prey is fleeing
> Something to rub out the woods
> From the blackboard sound of wind and rain

[58] Richard, Jackson, "Charles Simic and Mark Strand: The Presence of Absence", *Contemporary Literature*, 21, winter 1980, 141.
[59] Jackson, 140.

A device to recover a state of pure expectancy

Only the rubbings only the endless patience
As the clearing appears the clearing which is there
Without my even having to look
The domain of the marvellous prey

This emptiness which gets larger and larger
As the eraser works and wears out
As my mother shakes her apron full of little erasers
For me to peck like breadcrumbs

In his analysis Jackson explains:

> The fading thus provides us with a summons, a summons to erase, to clear away our usual conceptions that bind us to a traditional world view, a summons to reinvest the nostalgia of origin as a new beginning, "to recover a state of pure expectancy." Thus the prey itself will always escape, and the language of its hiding places in old "woods" (words) must be replaced by new language, new signifiers, new metaphors as the old "wear out". The summons that the poet hears leads him back towards the origin, the mythical presence revealed by its absence in language, the absent "mother" veiled bind the apron of always more erasers.[60]

To attain the state of silence, the mother, the poet has to give up, to "erase", his own ego, his own preconceived world view. To describe this state of pure expectancy the poet has to invent ever new images, to use "wildest imaginings" (UFT 65). This is why Simic's poetry both lacks an interfering autobiographical "I" and is full of strange and refreshing images that depict our world in an unfamiliar way. The "eraser", the will and need to forget himself, and "faith", the patience to be led, are the fundamentals of Simic's poetic technique. The result is a detached and often cryptic poetry.

Though Simic's poetry becomes more personal between 1974 and 1982, he remains a silent observer of the world who tries to grasp the object in front of him. War and death as well as the unifying concept of history become more dominant in his work and he starts to write more about social issues as in "Auction" (CC 4). The tone of these poems still reveals that Simic is observing rather than criticising openly and fervently. The poems between *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974) and *Austerities* (1982) are explorations and discoveries of his past. Simic has to accustom

[60] Jackson, 142.

himself to his childhood memories. The ideas of war, death and history evolve cautiously. While developing his ideas on these topics, he still comes back to his older object poems. To avoid mere repetition, he enriches them with allusions to folk poetry or mythology. Nevertheless, Simic seems to return to these older ideas, as if to make sure of not losing ground. His development does not proceed in a harsh and abrupt way. He keeps going forward and backward, circling around older ideas and timidly stepping on new ground. The poems between 1974 and 1982 prove that Simic has enlarged and developed his poetry.

From 1983 to 1990 a gradual shift of tone can be detected. The solipsistic concentration on every-day objects is omitted and Simic adopts a more radical attitude towards society. Though Simic does not forsake his poetic doctrine of trying to embrace the moments of silence, he is, superficially, more concerned with history and society. He continues to work on the ideas that he started to develop between 1974 and 1982. War and history even become a kind of obsession for Simic. The repeated reference to war should not be interpreted merely as a perpetual repetition of one idea. The war poems, which enlarge his work from *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974), refer to his own experience during the Second World War in Belgrade. The later war poetry is a reaction to the wars in former Yugoslavia that broke out in 1991, first in Slovenia and then moving over to Croatia and Bosnia. Simic's occupation with war and history reflects his view that "one can read literally hundreds of pages of contemporary poetry without encountering any significant aspect of our common twentieth century existence. The poets write about Nature and they write about themselves in the most solipsistic manner, but they don't write about their executioners" (UC 127) Simic writes in "Notes on Poetry and History" (1984). Simic wants to overcome the abstract discourse of history and wishes to render the "vulnerability of those participating in tragic events" (UC 126). He wants to make his readers aware of the brutality and aggressiveness in our world. Simic, who believes "that the future will bring more crimes and no utopias" (UC 127) develops in his later poetry a much more accentuated political and moral attitude. His obsession with war shows that Simic wants to make us aware of the tragedy in our days. He not only describes it, he openly protests against our "executioners".

His focus on a few decisive ideas, which he keeps developing, has led to a steady stream of critical articles that claim that Simic's poetry is repetitive and fails to offer new subjects. "His tradition is that of peasant poetry, with strong Middle European roots, and the transition to a status as an urbanised American teacher is fraught with its own peculiar perils: what began as strengths have a tendency to become mannerisms. After all, there are only so many homiletic proverbs one can rewrite, and even the ballad

and child's verse forms Simic frequently uses for his variations have an inexorable law of diminishing returns", writes George Hitchcock about *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* (1974).[61] The reproach of repeating earlier tunes is widespread among his critics. In some sense this criticism is justified. Simic often dwells on the same subjects in his poetry. His style evolves slowly and subtly and might lead to the impression that his poetry hardly changes. Some features of his style, it is true, keep recurring and reinforce this sensation. What Simic does in the course of the years is to refine and to rework his poetry. His quest to find words for our mute existence urges him to rewrite and correct earlier versions of his poetry as he explains in *The Cortland Review* in 1999.

Another reason why Simic's poetry is repeatedly described as repetitive is related to his consistent use of a limited number of stylistic devices such as free verse. His persistence in using a simple language that hovers on the brink of colloquialism and the fact that most of his poems are usually very short corroborates this impression. In Simic's case, however, repetition seems to improve the quality of his poems and quality should always be preferred to mere inventiveness. One of the most important elements of Simic's style that constantly resurfaces in his work is the use of combining two unfamiliar ideas. In "Butcher Shop" "(WGS 14), which was published in 1967, Simic writes:

> Sometimes walking late at night
> I stop before a closed butcher shop.
> There is a single light in the store
> Like the light in which the convict digs his tunnel.
> ...
> There are knives that glitter like altars
> In a dark church
> Where they bring the cripple and the imbecile
> To be healed.

The combinations are used to transport the poem into another direction and to simultaneously keep the form together. The word "light" both connects the butcher shop and the tunnel. And in the third stanza the word "glitter" binds the idea of knife and church together. The effect of these comparisons is startling. But their combination — due to the connecting words "light" and "glitter" — is not far-fetched. Simic is able to construct a combination between two images that seems surreal and unfamiliar, but at the same time he is able to provide a basis for his comparison. The use of

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[61] George, Hitchcock, "A Gathering of Poets", *Western Humanities Review*, 28, autumn 1974, 409.

this stylistic device helps him to widen the field of his images and to create a poignant and refreshing effect. The similarities between the altar and the knives are created by the light within the shop itself and the reflection of it in the knives. The poem thus flows easily with the help of association. At the same time the associations help to hold the poem together.

Juxtaposition is another feature of Simic's style. Simic not only uses contrast to strengthen his ideas, he also works with opposition and paradox to underline a particular idea. In the poem "To Think Clearly" (HI 32), which was published in 1992, Simic writes about an angel and a pig.

> What I need is a pig and an angel.
> The pig to stick his nose in a slop bucket,
> The angel to scratch his back
> And say sweet things in his ear.
>
> The pig knows what's in store for him.
> Give him hope, angel child,
> With that foreverness stuff.
> Don't go admiring yourself
> In the butcher's knife
> As if it were a whore's mirror,
> Or tease him with a blood-stained apron
> By raising it above your knees.
>
> The pig has stopped eating
> And stands among us thinking.
> Already the crest of the rooster blazes
> In the morning darkness.
> He's not crowing but his eyes are fierce
> As he struts across the yard.

As the title of the poem indicates, Simic needs contrasts to think clearly. Only with the help of two opposing pairs is he able to produce a picture of the world. The pig stands for the low life and the body, while the angel should bring solace and consolation. Simic does not keep these two worlds apart. He puts them in relation to each other. The angel, who scratches the back of the pig, is an example of Simic's attempt to combine the sacred and the profane and it is the reflection of a world view, where the levels cease to exist and everything is presented in the same dimension.

It is an image full of humour. But there is tragedy, because the pig is on its way to the slaughterhouse. Simic's plea is directed towards the angel: "give him hope, angel child, / With this foreverness stuff". The pig needs solace. The demanding voice, which is so strong in his later poetry,

becomes sarcastic as the lines "Don't go admiring yourself / In the butcher's knife /As if it were a whore's mirror" show. Simic extends on the simple metaphors of the angel and the pig. The butcher's knife becomes a metaphor both of vanity and cruelty and the apron is a sign of lust and poverty. However, the pig is doomed to die. But like a stubborn and brave hero it refuses to cry. It thinks. What it broods about, the poet does not say. But the image of the rooster, who with fierce eyes and without crying struts around, speaks of heroic spite. Though the angel and the pig might meet in imagination, reality separates them. Therefore, I would not agree fully with Helen Vendler when she argues that "Simic's work demands that we cohabit with both classes, with pigs and angels alone".[62] Simic puts the two opposing worlds together to create a shocking, funny or tragic effect. It is true that Simic uses both classes. He takes the texture that is out there for him to reach and incorporates it into his poetry. Simic does not give us insight into the world of pigs or angels. Both things are only used as metaphors to help him think clearly, to make him aware that the world is made up of opposites and that these opposites create comedy, humour as well as tragedy and pain.

In "To Think Clearly" (HI 32), Simic uses simple language. He just hints at the subject without elaborating on it. The sentence "and stands among us thinking" has a strong impact as it leaves room for the reader's imagination to wonder about what the pig might think. The advantage of this form is that with simple allusion the tension can be heightened. It works like a secret. The omission attracts us and urges us to ponder it. The poet does not state directly what he means with the sentence. In the last three lines, the image of the stubborn rooster suggests what the pig might think: heroic spite in the face of death.

For Simic, juxtaposition and the use of contrast are not only stylistic devices to produce effects easily. Their use is the reflection of his deep conviction that only "wildest imaginings" are able to unlock the secret of our mute existence. Their repeated use may lead to the conclusion that Simic' poetry offers no innovation. But "To Think Clearly" obviously shows that even 40 years after he started to write his first poems, Simic is still writing memorable poetry that continues to capture his readers. The cultural fetish of innovation should be abandoned in Simic's case and be substituted with a closer look at the subtle development of his style. In addition, the fact that Simic, despite the "repetitions", hardly ever falls into the trap of cliché speaks for his inventiveness and the quality of his poems.

While juxtaposition and contrast are constant features of his style, Simic's use of vagueness as a stylistic device becomes more accentuated during his career. Simic increasingly leaves out detail from 1974 onwards,

[62] Weigl, 120.

after the end of the object poems. In the essay, "Totemic Sifting: Charles Simic's *The Book of Gods and Devils*, *Hotel Insomnia* and *Dime-Store Alchemy*", Helen Vendler remarks that one of the hallmarks of Simic's style is "an apparently speakerless scene; an indefinite article establishing the vagueness of place and time".[63] This statement is true for most of his poetry. In "Butcher Shop" (WGS 14), Simic opens with the lines: "Sometimes walking late at night". In "Nursery Rhymes" (CC 10), "the little pig goes to market" and in "School for Visionaries" (J 51), "the teacher sits with eyes closed". Words such as "sometimes" or phrases like "late at night" and vague references such as "the little pig" or "the teacher" are enough for Simic to provide a setting. In the poem "Front Tooth Crowned with Gold" (A 43), Simic opens the poem with "demonstrating the world's most amazing / Potato-peeler with a suitcase and a card table". Although Simic writes of "Pharaonic avenues" in the next line, it is impossible to locate the poem in a specific time frame or place. The lines — though factual in their tone — exclude the possibility of orientation in time and space. The poem cannot be put into Cartesian coordinates. Simic uses this method in order to focus more on an idea or an emotion. It does not matter when and where exactly the poet had an idea or an emotion. The circumstances are of minor importance. What is important, is the idea as such, the content, the essential. Therefore, Simic abstains from using specific place names or time indications to represent his ideas. The net effect of this device is that Simic's poetry remains shrouded in mystery and continues to produce an intriguing atmosphere that many of his readers describe as cryptic and puzzling.

In his most recent poetry, colloquialism is a recurring feature of Simic's poetry. Phrases like "that foreverness stuff", or the lines "boss of all bosses of the universe/ Mr. Know-it-all" (J 63), or "No lack of costumes, I assure you" (WH 27) give his poetry a nonchalant tone. In the interview with Santos (1984), Simic argues that it was the influence of blues that made him aware that "one also has to know how the people in the language you're writing in sing" (UC 69). The colloquial tone of blues lyrics might thus be a reason for Simic's persistent use of simple and everyday language. But often this use of colloquial language makes his poem flat like "To the One Upstairs" (J 63), where the numerous colloquial appositions for God render the poem naive and one-dimensional. The use of these expression reaches its strongest effect when it is contrasted with high-brow or pathetic language like in "To Think Clearly" (HI 32), where the phrase "with that foreverness stuff" is contrasted to the pathetic "Give him hope, angel child". The colloquialism, thus, is another means for the poet to heighten the contrast, to create a shocking effect.

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[63] Weigl, 119.

The pleasure that Simic finds in words is not the only sign of the poet's sensuality. Eating and sex and other various hedonistic activities are conspicuous features of his poetry. In "To All Hog-Raisers, My Ancestors" (WGS 15), Simic adds garlic to his pork, in "The Body" (RPLGM 51), the poet describes the body as the "last continent / Still to be discovered", in "Crazy about Her Shrimp" (WH 40), Simic combines the pleasures of sex with cooking and in "Midsummer Feast" (J 60) the poet, describing himself as half-dead, half-lame, sates himself at the beauty of a "flower-strewn" meadow and a vast banquet of "evening stars". The pleasure of eating and sex are most obviously stated in "Café Paradiso" (WBC 39).

> My chicken soup thickened with pounded young almonds
> My blend of winter greens.
> Dearest tagliatelle with mushrooms, fennel, anchovies,
> Tomatoes and vermouth sauce.
> Beloved monkfish braised with onions, capers
> And green olives.
> Give me your tongue tasting of white beans and garlic,
> Sexy little assortment of formaggi and frutta!
> I want to drown with you in red wine like a pear,
> Then sleep in a macédoine of wild berries with cream.

This poem is a firework of pleasure. Simic combines the joy of eating with the pleasure of sex. The "chicken soup thickened with pounded young almonds" is not only a delicate dish, it is also a description of his beloved with whom he wishes to "drown" and, after the sexual act, to "sleep in a macédoine". The sexual act with his beloved is described as a five-course meal. Eating and sex are blended together to heighten the ecstatic sensation. The body is a "soup", "tagliatelle", then compared to "monkfish" and later the poet urges his beloved to give him her tongue that tastes of "white beans and garlic". Only words and expressions like "give me your tongue", "sexy", "drown with you" and the repeated use of "my" indicate that the poet is actually addressing a woman. Simic's technique of reduction, of simply hinting at things with the simplest means, creates a powerful effect. His love address is not stated directly and obviously. Simic uses allusion as a means to create a powerful effect.

In the essay "Food and Happiness" (1992), Simic writes, "when our souls are happy, they talk about food". This statement shows how much Simic connects the idea of happiness to sensual pleasures. But this does not necessarily mean that happiness is ultimately restricted to sensual experiences. Rather, it shows that sensual pleasures belong, for Simic, to

the highest form of happiness. And food, sex and happiness usually go hand in hand in Simic's work.

Although one can find various specimens of such poems in Simic's work, his poetry, despite its sense of humour, is often bleak. This pessimism has certainly developed out of his understanding of the social reality of his time, his experiences of war and dictatorship in his early life. However, it would be difficult to argue that Simic is a pessimistic thinker and writer, especially when considering poems like "Café Paradiso" (WBC 39). But a nagging sense of doubt is certainly a feature of his later poetry. Most of the poems, in which he ponders the absence of God speak of the inherent tragedy of men. This gloomy attitude, however, does not lead way to resignation. The tone of these poems, especially in his later work, is full of open criticism and the tone speaks of Simic's sense of defiance and active resistance against the injustice that he sees in the world.

In the essay "Fried Sausage" (1992), Simic argues that "history has not ended, despite recent predictions to the contrary, but is proceeding, as it always has, on its bloody way" (UFT 21). He does not believe in a future of global peace and happiness. He hopes for it and fights for it. However, too many wars have inextricably become part of his life. The Second World War, which he experienced in Yugoslavia, the Vietnam War, which he followed on television in the United States and the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia prove him to be right that history proceeds "on its bloody way". But Simic cannot do much about it. In the same essay, he continues: "Our options are limited. We can either sing hymns our grind or teeth, as Zbigniew Herbert pointed out. I do both" (UFT 21). Simic both writes poetry and criticises. This is all that he can do about the *predetermined* course of history.

In his poetry, Simic wishes to describe a moment of experience, an illuminated second in which he is aware of himself and the world. He longs to find an authentic language. To catch the present moment is what Simic is after. His poetry is not directed towards the discovery of a better world. Simic, unlike Gary Snider, has no utopia or ideal world, where life could be created in a new and authentic fashion. Simic is an observer and despite his criticism of society, he is a realist rather than idealist. His intention is not to write philosophy and explain the world as a whole. He wants to capture moments of his life. In the essay "Poetry Is the Present" (1991), Simic writes, "American poetry has been obsessed with presence and visible truth since the days of Emerson and Whitman. "By visible truth we mean the apprehension of the absolute condition of present things", writes Melville to Hawthorne in a letter. The subject of much American poetry is the epistemology of presence" (UFT 56). The result of this kind of poetry is that contradiction and paradox are part of the poet's oeuvre. As a consequence, Simic cannot pay attention to logic as far as his work as a

whole is concerned. The moment is of paramount importance, his entire concentration is focused on it and the writing is directed towards doing justice to this moment.

In Simic's work, both the beauty of life and its horrors are depicted. Simic's outlook for mankind's future is clouded, but he still finds pleasure and happiness in food, sex and words. War for him is disgusting and horrible. Yet, as the poem, "Massacre of the Innocents" (WH 19) shows, the poet can experience a moment of happiness in times of war. The paradox that the poet experiences in his life is mirrored in his work. All experiences that have influenced his poetry give the reader an idea of the breadth of Simic's life. Those particles constitute an organic rather than logical whole. They make up the sum of Simic's experiences, the sum of some moments of his life.

Poetry, in Simic's view, is the present. His poetry tries to be true to these moments and, consequently, to life. Life, in Simic's eyes, cannot be grasped by abstract ideas and generalisations. Only the specific instant can show us what life really is. In the essay "Fried Sausage" (1992), Simic writes that he has "a horror of generalisations… Nature as experience — making a tomato salad, say, with young mozzarella, fresh basil leaves, and olive oil — is better than any idea about Nature" (UFT 21). Simic wants to be specific. He is interested in details and not in generalised abstractions. Life, in Simic's view, unfolds itself in the particular and singular and not in the general and abstract. His style pays tribute to this idea as seen in the poem "Café Paradiso" (WBC 39). The idea that generalisations have to be avoided is mirrored in Simic's interest in the individual. For him, as he writes in "Elegy in a Spider's Web" (1993), "only the individual is real" (UFT 37). Only the individual can be genuine, only the specific is unique. The poet, for Simic, is the one "who speaks the harsh truth that only individual lives are unique and therefore sacred" (UFT 38). The life of the individual is holy and, therefore, it has to be protected. Simic defends the concept of the individual by writing about it. He can, citing Zbigniew Herbert, either sing hymns or grind his teeth about abstract ideas and general notions. Simic praises in his writing the world of the individual and the unique.

For Simic, the world is made up of components. Thus, we can only know the world by understanding the singular entities. General ideas of the world cannot bring us nearer to it. Such abstractions alienate ourselves from the world and we lose contact. In order to understand we must attempt to establish a contact with the world, the thing in front of us. This is only possible by taking into account the plurality of the world and its paradoxical consequences. By focusing on a particular moment, a particular thing, Simic is able to produce a mirror-image of an instant of the world. Only by restricting himself to the concrete, to the thing in front of his eyes,

is he able to create an identity between word and thing. Only with the help of this technique can Simic make silence speak.

In the poem, "My Quarrel with the Infinite" (HI 61), Simic brings his predilection for the single instant of experience to the point. "I preferred the fleeting, / Like a memory of a sip of wine / Of noble vintage / On the tongue with eyes closed...", he writes in the first stanza of the poem. The single moment, although it may pass too quickly, is preferred by the poet to eternity. The concept of eternity excludes time and, therefore, change. Simic refuses that concept. For him, the world is in a constant flux. Consequently, as a poet who wants to achieve an identity between word and thing, he prefers change to stability, plurality to singularity. The single moment, the fleeting presence is all we ultimately have. Although, "eternity [is][64] jealous / Of the present moment", as he writes in "The Betrothal" (BGD 21), the moment will pass. "And then the moment was over" and Simic enjoys the moment "like a memory of a sip of wine".

The singularity of our experience, its uniqueness is described in Simic's poetry. Be it the experience of observing a specific incident or the description of war and human hardship. Simic usually tries to do justice to the particular, the specific and unique. He does not create a theory about the dismal state of our world, he refuses generalisations and abstract renderings of the world. Simic gives the reader an individual situation to deal with.

The particular can only unfold itself in a moment. Only in this moment the individual exists. The experience might be "fleeting", passing and short-lived. All that life has to offer are these ephemeral moments. Their sum is our life. These moments, silent as they are, are what Simic wants to translate into his poetry.

[64] My brackets.

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